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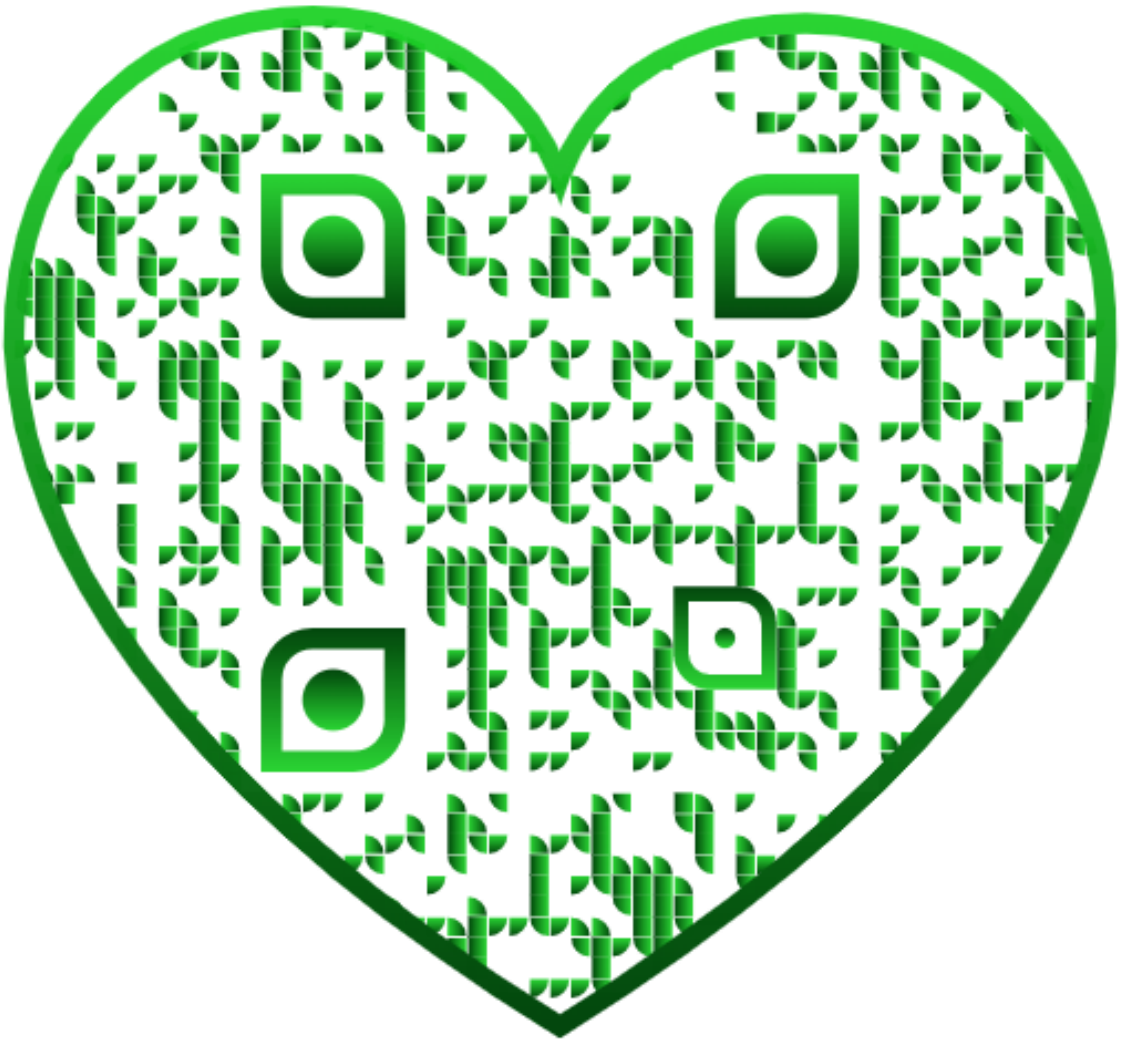

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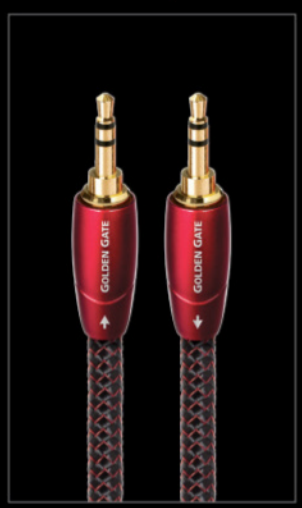


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# Seeing Red?

## Yes, there is a particular significance to all these red cables.

All these cables cost more than people not familiar with performance audio and A/V would expect to spend to hook up their gear.

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William E. Low
Founder

audioquest®

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09.22

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COVER STORY

## LUMIN P1 NETWORK PLAYER/ PREAMPLIFIER

**WITH A TERRIFIC-SOUNDING DAC,** extensive preamplifier capabilities, an innovative lossless digital-domain volume control, and beautiful build-quality, the $10k Lumin P1 presses all the right buttons. Robert Harley offers an in-depth assessment of a product that is perfectly tailored to today's audio systems.

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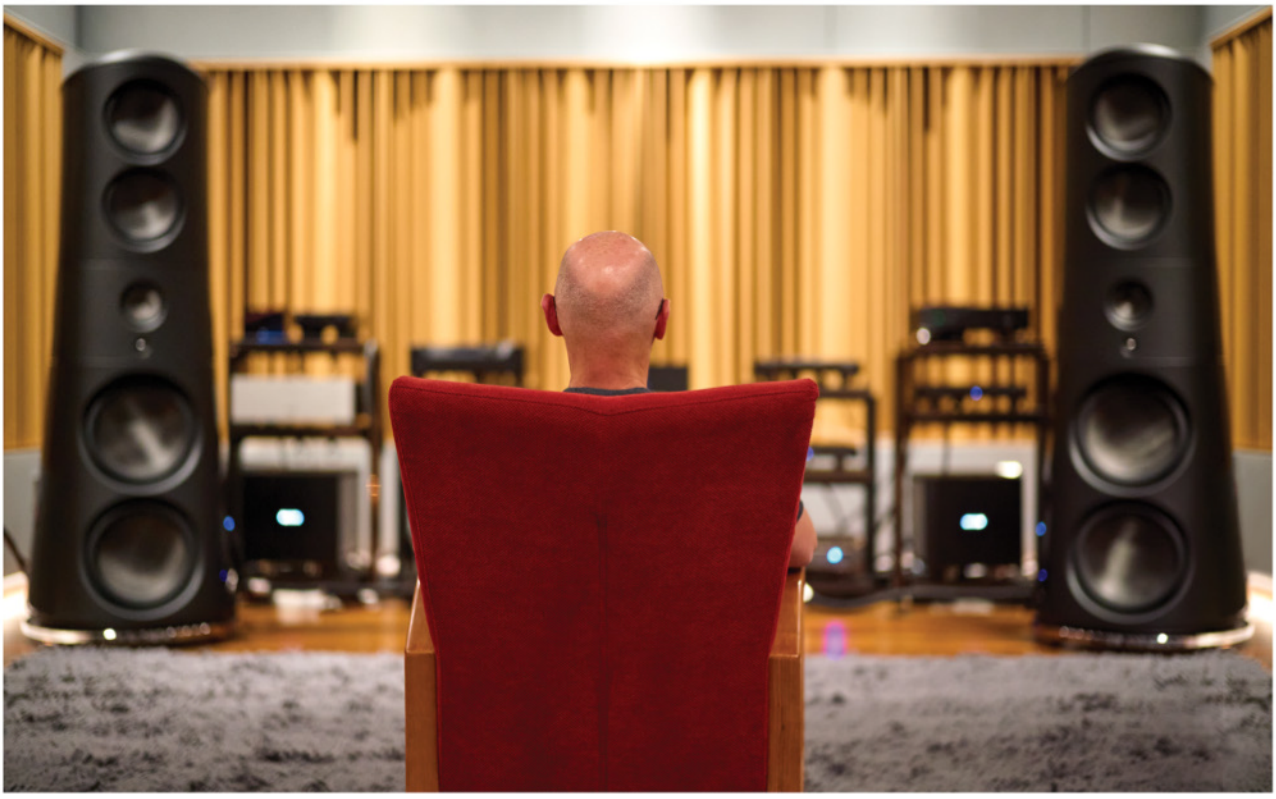

"I spent about eight hours listening to the M9 over two days... Once the listening commenced, it was immediately apparent that the M9 was different from any other speaker I've heard... The sound had the remarkable quality of appearing from nowhere, completely untethered to the speakers. This characteristic was certainly related to the M9's completely silent background as well as its stunning spatial presentation, with wide staging and continuousness of imaging. But the M9's disappearing act went beyond these usual tropes. The impression of hearing music rather than a hi-fi system was profound. The M9 is so transparent to the music that I had the odd sensation of the speakers not being the source of the sound. Opening my eyes at the end of a piece of music, I was sometimes momentarily startled to see this pair of giants standing in front of me... All the performances took on a heightened sense of urgency, energy, and spontaneous music-making in a way that was absolutely thrilling... the speaker has a complete and unwavering sense of effortless ease on all music. It can scale the heights of the most demanding music without a hint of congestion or confusion. It's just a natural, organic, immensely involving sound on any type of music and at any listening level.

Overall, I have to say that the Magico M9 is the best-sounding loudspeaker I've heard. It represents the ultimate realization of the accumulated knowledge and sophisticated technologies Magico has developed over the past 25 years, along with some remarkable innovations that push the M9's performance to an unprecedented level."

Robert Harley, Editor-in-Chief, *The Absolute Sound*

**Harley, Robert. "Magico Swings for the Fences: The M9 Loudspeaker" – The Absolute Sound Blog, May 16, 2022. https://www.theabsolutesound.com/articles/magico-swings-for-the-fences-the-m9-loudspeaker.**

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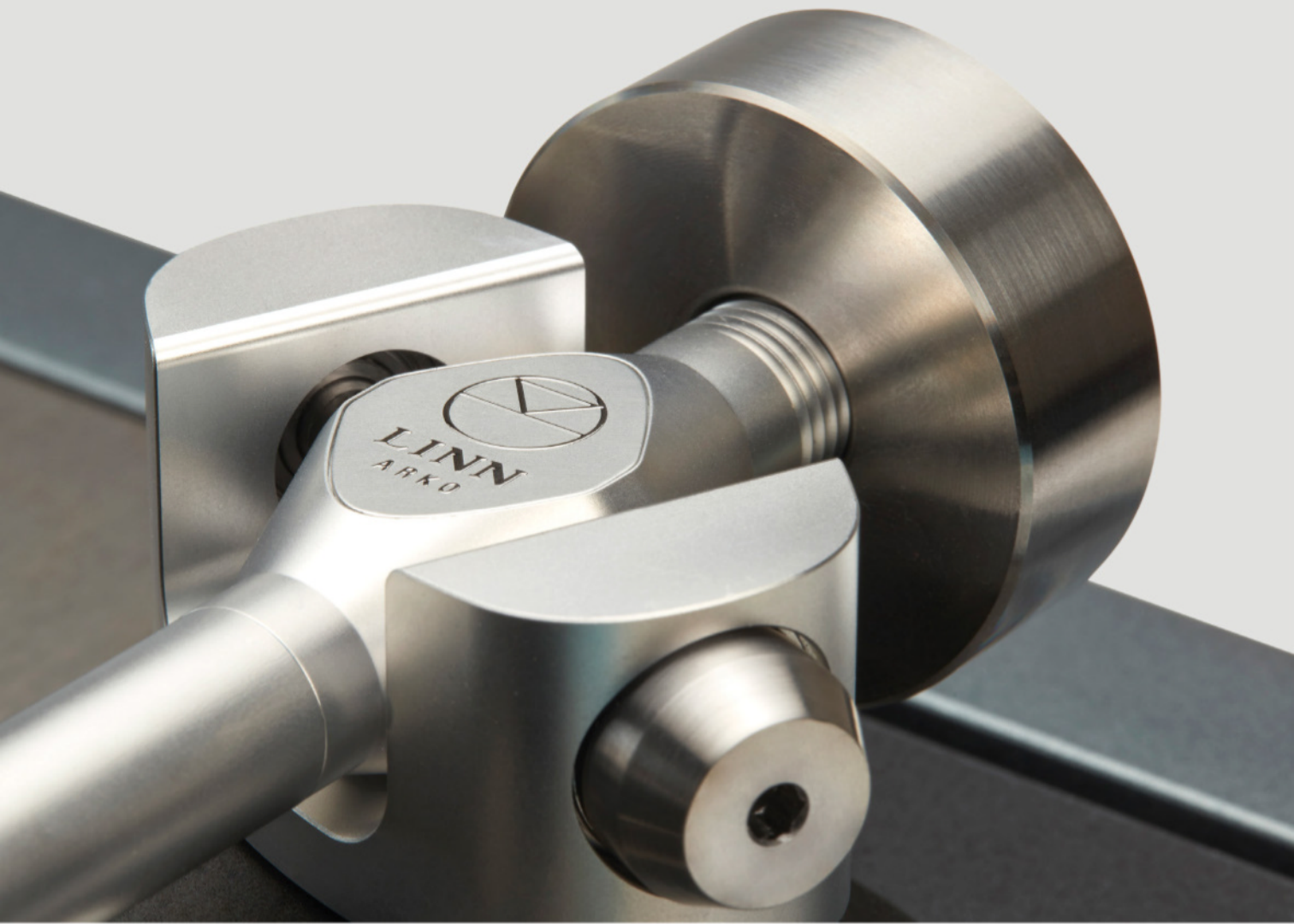

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# Letters

Email the Editor: rharley@nextscreen.com or: TAS, 2500 McHale Ct., Ste. A, Austin, Texas 78758

## Magnificent Performers!

Appreciation and absolute agreement with Paul Seydor's review of three Denon phonograph cartridges [Issue 328]! I have enjoyed the 103 and 103R models for many years. They are magnificent performers!

**Carlos E. Bauzá**

## Needs Only the Spec Sheet

In Issue 327's Letters column, reader Bob Wortman writes to explain to us that digital recording is superior to analog "by any known measure." His facts and figures assure him that this is so. But Mr. Wortman is careful to restrict his argument to resolution, and never once mentions sound. It is the mindset of the engineer, who will use only his textbooks to determine the quality of a piece of audio equipment and needs only its spec sheet to do it. Digital to me sounds like the equipment used in the movie *The Fly*. It puts music back together but just can't quite get it right. I still appreciate its attributes, but it's sad to me what those who can't hear past the occasional click or pop are missing out on. "Believing in magic doesn't make it real," Mr. Wortman admonishes. On that point we are in complete agreement.

**Charlie Politi**

## Bedeviled by Analog Superiority?

The individual who wrote in Letters in Issue 327 [*Bob Wortman*] about your [*RH's*] comments about analog and digital is typical of people who just can't stand the fact that digital is thought by some to be inferior to analog—and vice versa. It reminds me of the Shakespearean line, "The lady dost protest too much." Anyone who spends time telling the other party how wrong he is about that age-old debate reveals his own doubts about *his* way of thinking. Someone confident in his preferences and beliefs doesn't need to spend time telling people holding opposite opinions how wrong he feels they are.

I think he's actually worried that digital may not really be as superior to analog as he thinks and is bedeviled by it.

**Thomas Allen Scott**

## Snake Oil?

In the controversies about your publishing reviews of components costing hundreds of thousands of dollars, I get that the engineering pushes the limits of how to design and build these components and that the dedication and effort involve thousands of person hours in testing and redesigning costs. Almost none of us can ever hope to afford such things. But I still like to read about these works as a spectator.

However, there are a few limits that make me skeptical. Case in point, a set of speaker wires costing over $25,000. The physics claimed in advertisements is questionable. For instance, the boasts about a resistance difference of a few hundredths of an ohm in series with a speaker of four or more ohms at 20kHz versus DC due to skin effect, or the energy of polarization of dipole molecules in the insulation of speaker wires, or the carpeting on the floor upon which the speaker wires rest returning an audible sound to the wire itself after the feeble electric field changes. One speaker-wire ad claimed differences in signal path length between the signal current through the center of the wire and current passing from one side of the wire to the other "smears the sound." Such path lengths could be only a millimeter or two, and with the signal propagating at the speed of light, divide a millimeter by 3 times 10 to the 8th and ask yourself, can anybody hear a signal smeared by less than $10^{-8}$ seconds? For this reason, I am worried that there are some cases of snake oil in the industry. The average consumer does not have the graduate school physics (specifically electricity and magnetism theory) or electrical-engineering experience to know when pseudo-science is presented to him by marketers, who coax him into believing he can evaluate the likes of "golden ratio" of Litz wire strands, skin effect, and the need to prop speaker wires on little tripods to keep them off the carpeted floor.

Don't get me wrong, the difficulty of designing the ultimate turntable, or loudspeaker crossover to work with the characteristics of each driver with neither effort nor cost spared I esteem in great measure. I only think it naïve to indulge in the belief that the audio industry is anymore free of frauds than any other industry.

**Barney Vincelette**

*RH replies: See this issue's From the Editor.*

## Domestic Tube Manufacture

I was reading a comment in the Letters section from Roger Hadwin in the latest issue of *The Absolute Sound* [Issue 328] in which he was wondering why there is no American tube manufacturing plant and why we had to depend on insecure sources like Russia and China. There *is* a tube manufacturing plant in the States currently producing the 300B—Western Electric. The company will start production of the 6SN7 and the 417 later this year.

Full disclosure: We distribute Western Electric in Canada.

**Vince Scalzitti**

*RH replies: Our reviewer Rives Bird is working on a review of the Western Electric 91E integrated amplifier and will report on the company's tube-manufacturing process. In the meantime, you can see on Western Electric's website a fascinating video showing the steps in manufacturing a 300B tube at the company's Rossville Works in Georgia.*

**UPCOMING IN TAS 331**

**Loudspeaker Focus**

- **PS Audio Aspen FR30**
- **Magnepan LRS+**
- **YG Acoustics Vantage Live**
- **Raidho TD2.2**
- **Vivid Kaya S12**
- **Rogers LS3/5A 15-ohm**
- **Graham LS5/5**

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# From the Editor

# Summary Judgment

**In this issue's Letters column, reader Barney** Vincelette laments the tendency of some audio companies to invent apparently fantastical explanations of how their products work. I must agree with Mr. Vincelette that some of the technical descriptions stretch credulity.

But it would be a mistake to brand these products as shams. First, to summarily label a product as snake oil we must make an *a priori* determination of what phenomena can and cannot be perceived by the human brain when listening to music. Mr. Vincelette cites the example of lifters that elevate a cable above a carpeted floor. Cable lifters reportedly reduce the effect of the carpet's electrostatic field on the signal traveling down the cable. The electrical field must be so weak that it couldn't possibly affect the signal, Mr. Vincelette reasons.

**"The product may be efficacious, but the product's designers simply stumbled upon the technique and don't really understand the mechanism by which it works."**

However, there are myriad examples of ostensibly insignificant phenomena that later were proved to render audible differences. For one, who would have thought that 100 picoseconds of timing variations in the clock that reconstructs a digital audio signal would be grossly audible? One hundred picoseconds (100 trillionths of a second) is the time it takes light to travel *an inch*. It sounds absurd on the face of it, but that cause-and-effect is now well established.

The second reason not to summarily dismiss a particular product is that although the explanation may be wrong, the effect is very real. The product may be efficacious, but the product's designers simply stumbled upon the technique and don't really understand the mechanism by which it operates. The inventor, in good faith, often assigns a "false interpretation" to why the product works. In less benign cases, the company's marketing department cynically invents the explanation from whole cloth.

This isn't a new phenomenon, nor is it exclusive to audio. The following is an excerpt from my 1991 Audio Engineering Society Paper "The Role of Critical Listening in Evaluating Audio Equipment Quality." The reference to Polanyi is to scientific philosopher Michael Polanyi, and the two quotes (in italics) are taken from his landmark 1958 book *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. The terms "false interpretation" and "destructive analysis" are Polanyi's.

The case of hypnotism illustrates the cycle of false interpretation followed by destructive analysis. Franz Mesmer's dissertation at the University of Vienna in 1766 suggested that the gravitational attraction of the planets influenced human health by affecting an invisible fluid found in the human body and throughout nature. This theory evolved into "animal magnetism," wherein the invisible fluid in the body acted according to the laws of magnetism. According to Mesmer, "animal magnetism" could be activated by any magnetic object and manipulated by a trained person. Mesmer was accused of fraud and fled to Paris, where he enjoyed a lucrative practice fueled by patient testimonials.

Physician John Elliotson later expounded a whole system of laws governing animal magnetism. "*He claimed that the magnetism in a glass of water could be graded by dipping one finger into it, or two fingers, or the whole hand. Another 'law' declared that mucous surfaces of the subject, like those of the tongue or eyeball, were capable of receiving a greater mesmeric stimulus than the skin. All this was nonsense and proved to be nonsense. And since the assumption had not yet dawned on anyone that hypnotic suggestion was the effective agent of Mesmerism, the conclusion seemed inevitable that Elliotson's subjects were impostors, who were either deluding him or colluding with him.*" Elliotson appealed to his attackers to consider the practical evidence of his technique: "I have given the details of 76 painless operations. In the name of common sense and humanity, what more is wanted?" The fact remained that Elliotson's technique did indeed allow him to perform painless surgery.

Polanyi interprets:

*"Not until the concept of hypnosis was established as a framework for the facts could those facts be eventually admitted as true. Indeed, whenever truth and error are amalgamated in a coherent system of conception, the destructive analysis of the system can lead to correct conclusions only when supplemented by new discoveries. But there exists no rule for making fresh discoveries or inventing truer conceptions, and hence there can be no rule, either, for avoiding the uncertainty of destructive analysis."*

Similarly, today's false interpretations of audible phenomenon are subject to the same form of destructive analysis as was applied to hypnotism. Because an effect has no rational explanation, it doesn't automatically follow that the effect is nonexistent. Just as hypnotism was a very real effect—yet denounced as fraud—many audio devices can change the character of the reproduced sound. They too are denounced as fraud because the underlying causes are misrepresented, which opens the door to destructive analysis and even ridicule.

As with everything in audio, there's no substitute for listening and forming your own conclusions—no matter whether the explanation for a product's efficacy conforms to one's preconceptions or doesn't.

**Robert Harley**

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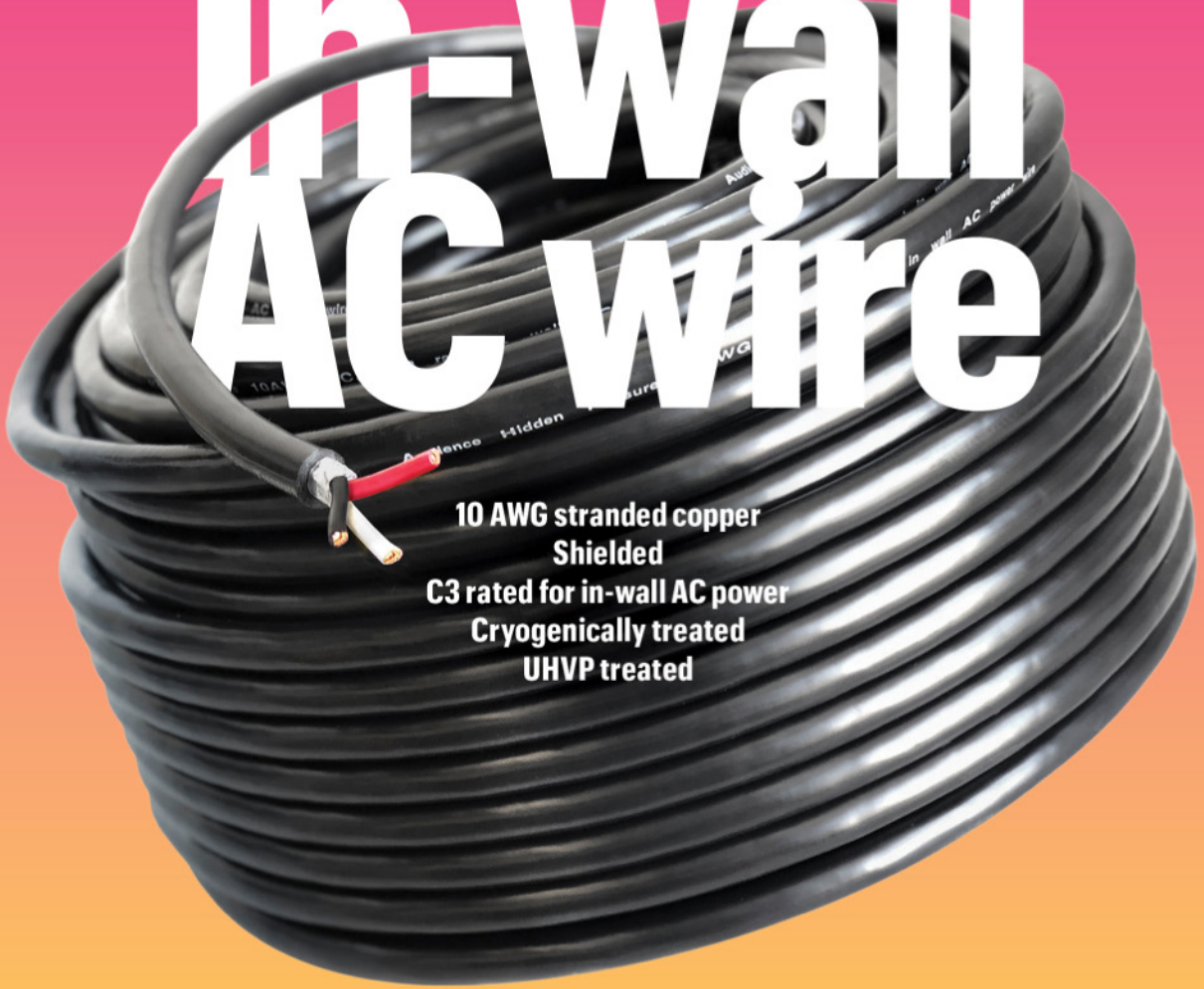

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# In Memoriam

## Atsushi Miura

Jonathan Valin

**TODAY, MAY 27, 2022,** I learned from Art Manzano of AXISS Audio that my dear friend (and Art's) Atsushi Miura, past general manager of the Lux Corporation (Luxman electronics), president of Lux Audio of America, and subsequently founder of A&M Ltd. (Air-Tight electronics and phono cartridges), passed away at the age of 88.

I could go on at length about Mr. Miura's many accomplishments—he is, after all, a charter member of TAS' High-End Audio Hall of Fame and earned a chapter of his own in *The Absolute Sound's Illustrated History of High-End Audio, Volume Two: Electronics*—but rather than make a list of his many notable accomplishments, I'd rather talk about how he and I became friends.

When I first went to Japan, better than a decade-and-a-half ago, I was warned, in a polite way, that the Japanese aren't like Americans. They don't show their feelings as readily or as openly as we do; their relationships are more formal and business-like, especially with strangers but even among close acquaintances. I was told to bow rather than to offer a handshake, never to touch (as with a pat on the arm), and, in general, to "keep a distance" in speech and action as a matter of custom and etiquette.

Now, as anyone who knows me can tell you, this is not my usual mode of behavior. I'm an emotional man (too emotional, at times, and quite the opposite of my cool-headed friend and colleague Robert Harley, which may be why we have fit together so well as counterparts for the past 25 years). Holding things in or back just isn't part of my makeup. If I like someone, I let him or her know it without reserve. If I don't, well, I can be confrontational.

On the first evening that I met Mr. Miura, he took us (my wife Kathy, Robert Harley, Julie Mullins, and me) and his Air-Tight team to a restaurant for sushi and sake. Mr. Miura did not speak English (or only a word or two), but as we drank (beer first, then sake) we both got a little tipsy—it was at this meal that I learned to say the word "Kanpai" ("bottoms up") as a toast, and, through Mr. Miura's gestural instruction, the custom of tapping your glass on the table when you finished drinking (to show satisfaction and encourage another pour). Between the booze and the delicious food, a near-palpable feeling of fellowship developed between us. By the end of the night, I was too drunk to follow the rules, and I gave him a friendly pat on the back as we parted.

Later in the trip, we visited a famous temple in Kyoto. By then, our friendship—remember we hadn't spoken an untranslated word to one another—had developed to the point where I'd stopped obeying the rules and started treating Mr. Miura as I would any new friend. I may not have been being very "Japanese," but my physical and verbal demonstrativeness seemed to please him.

At the temple we sat on a bench, enjoying the beautiful grounds and the lovely fall weather. An ice cream vendor happened by, and I went over and bought two green-tea-flavored cones, bringing one of them back for Mr. Miura. For whatever unspoken reason, this delighted him. As we ate our ice cream, we smiled at one another and started to laugh. No joke had been told—we couldn't converse in words—it was just delight in each other's company.

By the time the trip ended, Mr. Miura and I had become friends. Why he liked me so well, I'm not sure. Maybe because I was such a scofflaw when it came to etiquette. Maybe because he enjoyed the fact that I was being me. Why I liked him was his sheer generosity, elfin charm, and unspoken but unmistakable empathy—which is, I suppose, why I'm writing this eulogy in the way that I am, to show how friendship, like music, goes beyond language and custom to feelings that are felt, shared, and wordlessly acknowledged. As we parted, unprompted, Mr. Miura gave me a goodbye hug. It was a very un-Japanese gesture of affection and fellowship, but I will never forget it.

I visited Mr. Miura several times after our first meeting, and on each occasion the friendship between us deepened. On my last trip, it was obvious that Mr. Miura's health was failing. He had trouble walking because of an injury to his hip, but he never complained.

I had hoped to visit him again, but, alas, circumstances and then COVID kept me from traveling abroad. In the years since we last met in Japan, I saw Mr. Miura once or twice at shows, but never again in Osaka. I asked Art about him often, but the news was increasingly dismal. He became so debilitated that he was moved to a nursing facility; though he still traveled to work once a week, his son Jack had taken over running the business on a daily basis. Art tells me that Mr. Miura recently took another fall, breaking his hip. After that, it was a progressive decline until he passed away.

To say I will miss him isn't enough. He had a long, extremely successful, and noteworthy life in high-end audio. But it is as a sweet, convivial, downright lovable man, who, though we never really exchanged more than a word or two, became my friend, that I will miss him most.

Farewell, Miura-san. tas

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# Vladimir Lamm

Dick Olsher and Jonathan Valin

**ON APRIL 18TH** the high-end audio community lost one of its shining lights, a gentle giant who was comfortable in both the solid-state and tube-audio design realms. Born in Lviv, Ukraine, he received an engineering education at the Lviv Polytechnic Institute, which he put to good use, eventually publishing his first hi-fi amplifier circuit in 1978 and making quite a name for himself in the 1980s Soviet Union with some nifty low-distortion solid-state designs. He emigrated to the U.S. in 1987 and, after a short cooperative effort with Madison Fielding, went on to found his own company in 1993. His designs quickly gained a reputation for their innovative engineering and reference-class sound quality.

In my conversations with him he was always gracious and willing to engage in technical discourse, though eventually he pointed me to a chair and asked me to listen to the music. He felt that electronics expertise was not enough, and that one needed significant musical experience or exposure to live music to create superior audio gear. Over the years, he arrived at a set of subjective sound-quality criteria that informed his amplifier designs. It wasn't all about conventional distortion measurements but, for example, how an amplifier's distortion spectrum varied over its power bandwidth.

He was responsible for some terrific amplifier designs such as the ML2.2. To quote from Robert Harley's review: "What makes the ML2.2 different from other amplifiers— tubed or solid-state, single-ended or push-pull—is a sense of palpable realism and the feeling that music is being brought to life contemporaneously. The ML2.2 doesn't sound like just a great tubed amplifier, only a little better; it provides a fundamentally different listening experience.... The Lamm ML2.2 surely belongs in the pantheon of the world's greatest amplifiers—of any price or technology. This amplifier delivers the kind of special listening experience that you must hear for yourself to understand just how special it is—and how it can make other amplifiers, even the most highly regarded tube and solid-state designs, sound somewhat flat and sterile by comparison." We all miss you, Vladimir. RIP. **—Dick Olsher**

**I FIRST MET** Vladimir Lamm at Jerry Goldstein's apartment in New York City back in the mid- 1990s. Jerry owned Vladimir's electronics, about which I knew nothing at the time, and was a huge fan of his work. It happened that I was then using first-gen versions of Avant-garde's extremely high-sensitivity spherical-horn-loaded Trio loudspeakers as my references, so single-ended amplifiers were on my mind. Indeed, I'd already listened to and reviewed Gordon Rankin's wonderful little Cardinal monoblocks, followed by his equally impressive Napoleons, a Unison Research 845 amp from Italy, and several Audio Note SETs (back when Audio Note was exclusively designed by Hiroyasu Kondo and made in Japan).

The lush timbre of 300B, 211, and 845 output tubes simply beguiled me, and their "directness" set new (or back-to-the-future) standards of grain-free presence, realistic timbre, and lifelike dimensionality. By comparison, even the best push-pull tube amplifiers sounded grainy, thin, and veiled—and solid-state simply wasn't playing in the same ballpark.

Of course, directly heated triode amps weren't perfect.

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# In Memoriam

Though their midband tonality was drop-dead gorgeous, they could also be a bit overripe ("Technicolored," as the saying then went); their extension in the treble and grip in the bass were far from ideal; and their ability to handle "complex" loads ("complex" in this case meaning anything that wasn't a strict 8–16 ohms, very high in sensitivity, and first order in crossover) was virtually nil. Then Jerry introduced me to Vladimir's ML2.

After some unhappy experiences with the press, Vladimir was loath to allow anyone to review his products, but with Jerry's urging he finally agreed, giving me the opportunity—rare in this or any business—to hear and enjoy a genuine trail-blazing product.

The ML2 monoblocks only offered up 17Wpc (although single-ended triode watts somehow sounded a lot "stronger" than push-pull ones). Nonetheless, with the Trios and other high efficiency floorstanders, they were more than powerful enough. Functionally and sonically, they were also substantially different—which is to say, better—than the other SETs I'd heard. Of course, in many ways they were nothing like other SETs. For one thing, they didn't have the same 1930s-vintage output tubes that Rankin and Kondo, for examples, were using. Lamm based his circuit on the latter-day Russian 6C33C triode, and his gain stages were entirely of his own devising, based on a mathematical model of human hearing (which Lamm called "ALS," "absolute linearity of a system") that he started developing in graduate school.

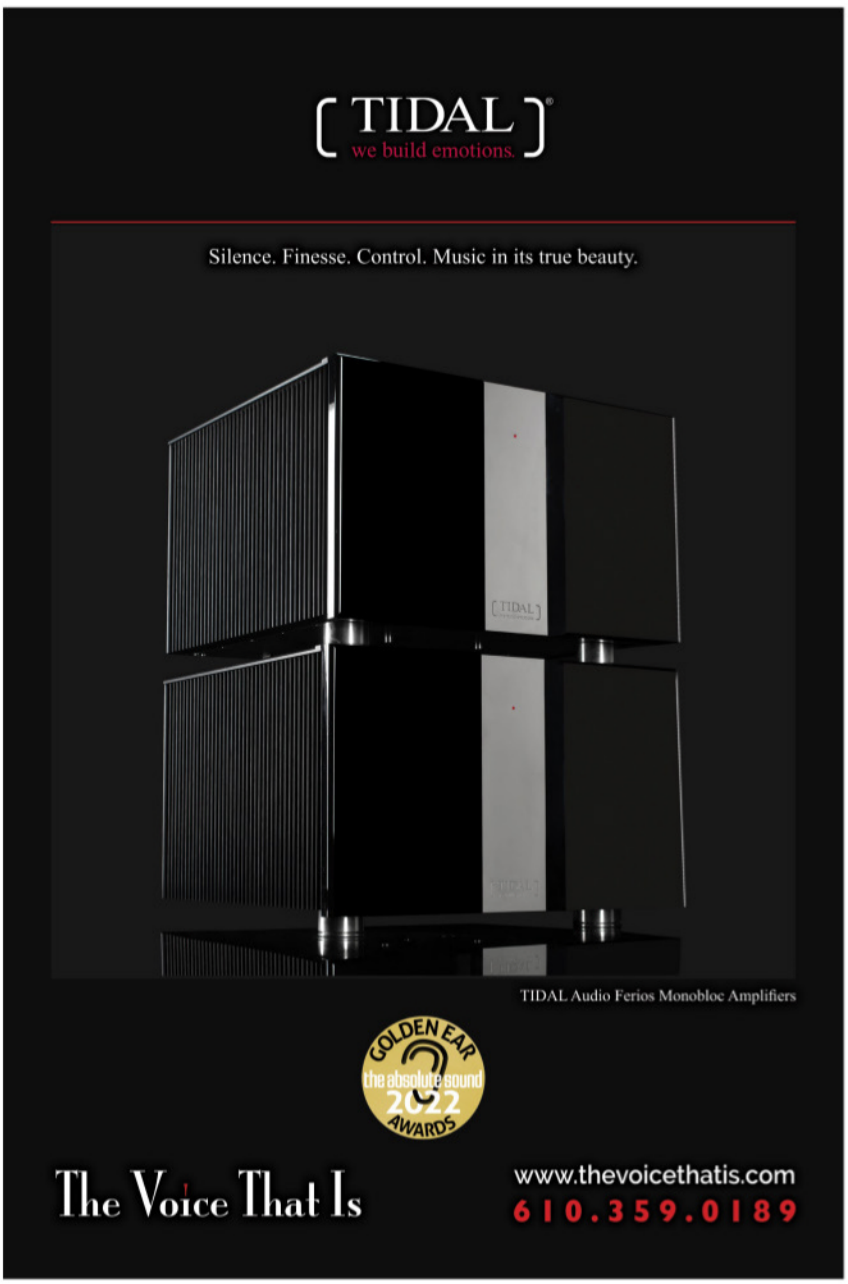
Vladimir didn't believe in listening as part of the electronics-design process. For him, measurements were the entire ballgame. However, his measurements weren't referred to contemporary scientific standards (such as the usual THD/IM readings) but to his own mathematical model of how human beings hear. By developing and implementing this unique scientific reference, Vladimir created SET amps that just didn't sound "single-ended-triode-like." Instead, they sounded like the real thing—and not just in the midrange, where SETs gloried—but from the bass to the treble.

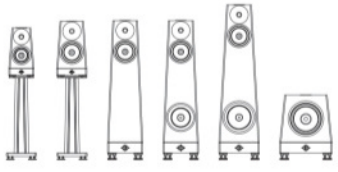
Unlike typical 1930s-tech SETs, Vladimir's ML2 had genuine grip and definition in the lowest octaves and genuine extension, color, and detail in the top ones. Oh, it still had that ineffable "rightness" and richness of timbre in the midband that made SETs so beguiling, but it extended those virtues to the extremes. Moreover, it could handle "complex" loads much more readily than other SETs (though you still had to keep an eye on efficiency). In sum, the ML2 added bandwidth, resolution, functionality, and something very like neutrality (or at least a uniform richness of color) to the midband-centric presentation of classic SETs. I'd never before heard anything quite as lovely or as lifelike as the ML2—and seldom since.

Although his wife Elina and his daughter Esther will continue his work in Lamm Industries' new and expanded Miami, Florida, facilities, there will never be another Vladimir. In fact, I'm not sure there was ever anyone like him before he came on the scene—a man of science who created a unique mathematical model of human hearing to use as the measurable basis for all high-end-audio designs.

For the pleasure and insight he gave me and so many other audiophiles, I thank him and wish him and his family lasting peace.

**—Jonathan Valin** tas





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# Magico Swings for the Fences

## The Mighty M9

Robert Harley

**I recently visited Magico's factory in Hayward, California,** where I heard the company's flagship M9 loudspeaker and learned about its design. The occasion also marked the recent completion of an acoustic overhaul of the Magico factory listening room.

Magico has a compelling track record of technical innovation and of creating great-sounding loudspeakers. The all-new M9 is the ultimate realization of the company's technologies and aesthetic, and also introduces a ground-breaking new cabinet construction. Significantly, the M9 is also the first Magico loudspeaker to benefit from two new sophisticated measurement instruments. I had seen photographs of the M9 on Magico's website but was floored to experience the speaker in person. Its sheer size, massive drivers, and stunning execution in flawless carbon fiber and aluminum are awe-inspiring. As I learned by seeing various components of the M9 under construction, the speaker is at the cutting edge of speaker technology. And as I discovered through about eight hours in the listening seat over two days, this new flagship sets a reference standard in reproduced music.

The M9 is a four-way, six-driver dynamic speaker in a sealed enclosure measuring 80" tall. The lower section flares dramatically into a wide oval that is reminiscent of a hoop skirt. The system is shipped in two sections; the lower section houses the dual 15" woofers, 6" midrange, and 1.1" tweeter. The upper section holds two 11" mid/bass drivers and is mated to the lower section when the speaker is installed. Each M9 weighs 1000 pounds, and the pair is priced at $750,000.

An important new element of the M9 is that the system is designed to be actively bi-amplified. The 120Hz crossover transition between the 15" woofers and the rest of the speaker is performed at line level in an outboard analog two-way active crossover. A preamplifier output feeds Magico's MXO crossover, which splits up the audio band at 120Hz. One stereo output from the MXO (the low-pass-filtered signal) feeds a stereo amplifier or pair of monoblocks to drive the 15"-woofer sections of each speaker. The second of the MXO's stereo outputs (the high-pass-filtered signal) is sent to a second stereo amp (or pair of monoblocks) that drives the rest of each speaker. (The crossover between the mid/bass and midrange driver and between the midrange and tweeter is realized with integral passive crossover components housed in an isolated carbon-fiber chamber in the speaker's lower enclosure.) This actively bi-amplified architecture confers a huge advantage in that the amplifier driving the 15" woofers can be connected directly to the woofers with no intervening, signal-robbing crossover components. Specifically, crossover circuits have a big inductor in series with the woofer that rolls off mid and high frequencies to the woofer. The lower the crossover frequency, the bigger the inductor, and the greater the inductor's deleterious effect. Removing that inductor has many advantages, including allowing the woofer amplifier to exert iron-fisted control over the woofer's motion. As with all Magico loudspeakers, the enclosure is sealed rather than ported.

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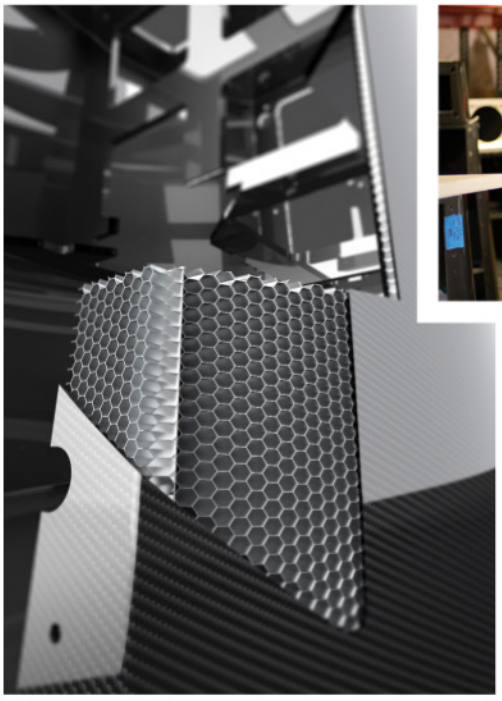
The M9's dramatically flared profile.



Above: Examining the M9's enclosure modules.

Left: A new technique of cabinet construction debuts in the M9, with an aluminum honeycomb lattice core flanked by carbon-fiber skins.

The Magico MXO analog active crossover is housed in two chassis.

This sounds fine in theory, but in practice the crossover is in the entire signal path; any degradation imposed by it will compromise the system's performance. With a speaker as high in resolution as the M9 is, and its obvious ambitions as a state-of-the-art transducer, the electronics in the crossover must be nothing less than transparent. Magico researched most of the active outboard crossovers that have ever been on the market before designing its own for the M9. The M9's MXO active crossover, supplied with the speaker, is a *tour de force*. It's safe to say that no analog active crossover has ever been created at this level of design and execution. The crossover is housed in two large chassis, one for the electronics and one for the power supply. The supply is bigger than that found in many power amplifiers. Modules in the electronics chassis can be changed to allow for different crossover frequencies. The crossover is built to—or beyond—the standards of the highest-end preamplifier circuits.

The M9 introduces several innovations, including a new cabinet construction that combines unprecedented stiffness with high damping. The front baffle and rear "spine" are machined from aluminum, as they are in all M Series speakers, but unlike those other models, the sides of the enclosure are a new design that sandwiches an aluminum honeycomb structure between two skins of carbon fiber. The six, three-sided cross-braced carbon/honeycomb chassis (per pair of speakers) are built to Magico's specs by a company that developed the aluminum-honeycomb-and-carbon-fiber arrangement for use in nuclear submarines and aerospace applications. The "beam section" created by this structure is extremely stiff, but also well damped and relatively light. All the internal braces within the enclosure are made from thick carbon fiber.

Magico's custom Nano-Tech drivers feature a similar sandwich of carbon-fiber and graphene skins over an aluminum honeycomb. The voice coils are massive (5" in the 15" woofer, for example) and are built around titanium formers. The M9 employs the eighth generation of these drivers, which have proven themselves over many previous iterations of Magico products. The tweeter is the sixth generation of the company's 28mm beryllium/diamond dome, used for the first time in the M9. (The very thin layer of diamond is vapor-deposited on the beryllium dome to further increase the dome's stiffness.)

The entire speaker is curved, with no discontinuities that would introduce diffraction. Magico built and tested 25 different midrange/tweeter baffle profiles before finding the optimum shape. With a pair of speakers requiring two midrange/tweeter baffles, that's 50 baffles that had to be machined from aluminum blocks, each one taking a full day to mill on a CNC machine.

The drivers are mounted to a flat aluminum plate behind the baffle. A layer of damping material sits between this flat panel and the curved front

# P1

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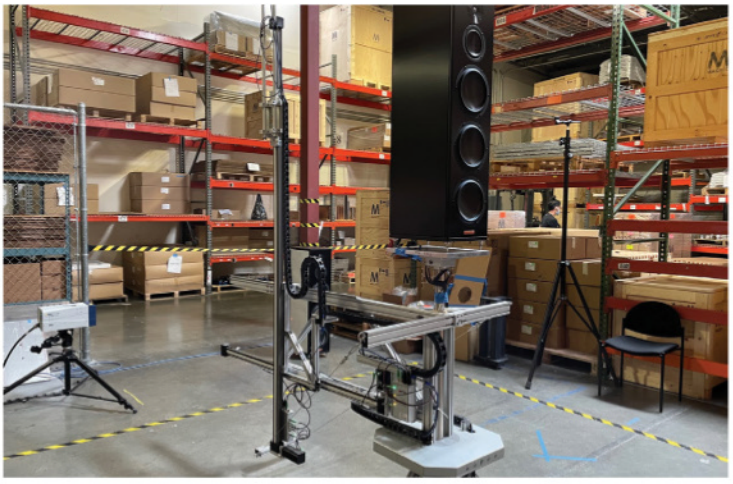
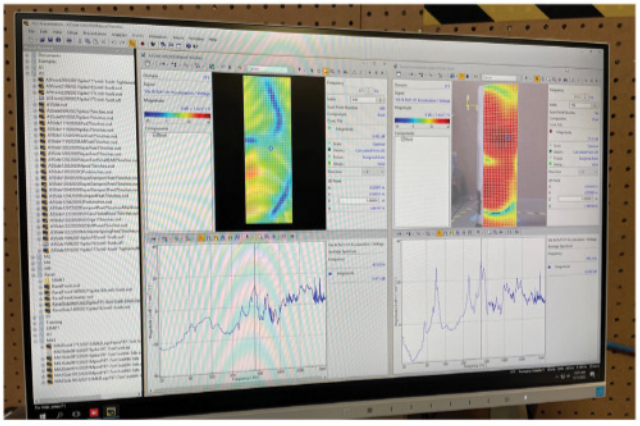
The laser vibrometer measures cabinet resonances over 2000 points on each enclosure panel.



The Klippel Near Field Scanner is revolutionizing loudspeaker measurement, replacing an anechoic chamber.



The graphic shows cabinet resonances, from blue (lowest amplitude) to red (highest amplitude) cabinet movement. Magico's A5 is shown on the left; a similarly priced speaker made from MDF is on the right, with identical measurement conditions.

baffle, with front-to-back tensioning rods compressing the entire structure. Using a laser vibrometer, Magico can create an animated graphic representation of baffle vibration with very fine detail, and then adjust this damping layer to minimize cabinet vibration. The damping material itself is available in different densities to target different frequency bands.

I saw the laser vibrometer in action on the factory tour. The speaker under test is positioned a few feet from the laser, and as the speaker is driven by an audio signal the reflected laser light from the speaker panel is analyzed. The measurement is repeated across 2000 points on the cabinet surface in an automated process. The result is a color graphic showing the amplitude of the cabinet's movement—blue for small movement, progressing to red for the greatest panel excursion. The graphic display can be put in motion to show how the vibration signature changes over time. This information guides the cabinet design, specifically in the placement of bracing and the effectiveness of different damping techniques, among other factors. I saw a comparison of the vibration signature of the aluminum cabinet of Magico's A5 loudspeaker ($25,000) along with the vibration signature of a similarly priced loudspeaker whose cabinet is made from MDF. The contrast was stark; the MDF enclosure was in relatively constant high-amplitude motion, its panels glowing bright red in the analysis indicating the greatest panel motion and thus cabinet-induced distortion.

In addition to the laser vibrometer, Magico has acquired a new state-of-the-art measurement tool that is revolutionizing loudspeaker design. Until this instrument, it was impossible to directly measure a speaker's low-frequency performance, even in a massive anechoic chamber. Most anechoic chambers provide accurate measurement down to about 200Hz. The larger the chamber, the lower the frequency that can be accurately measured, with the largest chambers good to about 100Hz. This new device, the Klippel Near Field Scanner (NFS), can accurately measure a speaker's frequency response down to 20Hz without an anechoic chamber. The NFS extracts the speaker's direct sound from reflections off the floor, walls, and nearby objects by removing these reflections in software. Moreover, the Near Field Scanner will plot the frequency response at 360° around the speaker in 1° increments. The automated process positions the microphone, takes a measurement, and then automatically moves the microphone slightly for the next measurement. This process takes about 24 hours for one speaker. At a quarter of a million dollars, the Klippel machine is expensive, but vastly less costly than building an anechoic chamber—and unlike an anechoic chamber, the NFS can accurately measure a speaker's low-frequency response down to 20Hz.

I had visited Magico's listening room before the recent overhaul and thought it was the best room I'd heard. Magico founder Alon Wolf told me that he agreed, but that the room needed to be

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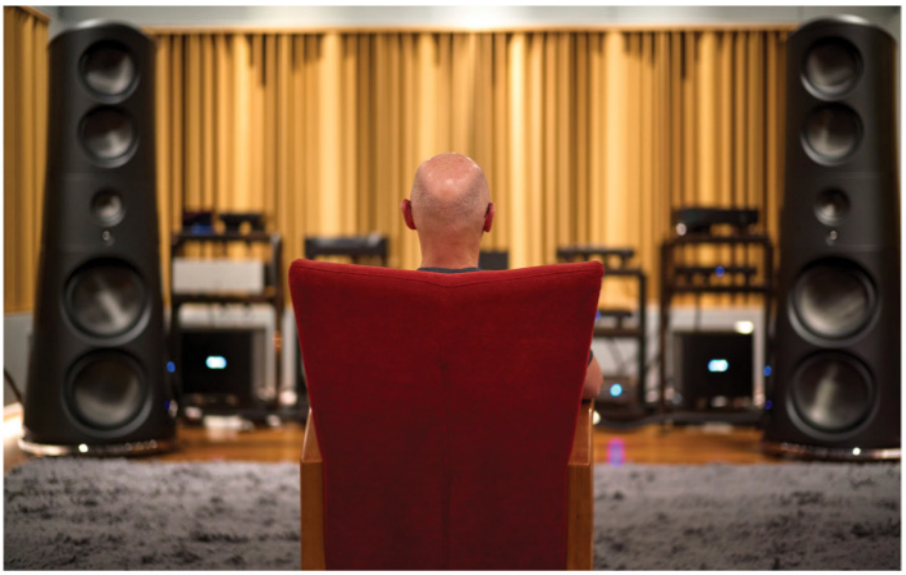
a laboratory reference as free from coloration as possible. Specifically, the previous room had some audible resonant modes below 120Hz, colorations that left him sometimes second-guessing himself about a loudspeaker's intrinsic tonal balance. Although all rooms, no matter how sophisticated their design, will exhibit resonance modes, Magico's newly rebuilt room has a more linear low-frequency response.

Alon told me that with the new room, the laser vibrometer, and the Klippel NFS, he finally had tied together the three elements of designing and building loudspeakers—computer modeling, measurement, and listening. Magico has long used computer modeling and simulations in its development efforts, largely through the prodigious talents of Magico's Chief Technical Officer Yair Tammam. Yair, who joined Magico in 1998, once described to me how a software breakthrough allowed him to model a driver's behavior in the mechanical, thermal, electrical, and magnetic domains simultaneously. The laser vibrometer allows Magico to precisely target cabinet resonances, and the Klippel Near Field Scanner provides, for the first time, an accurate picture of the speaker's bass performance. The new listening room is the last component of that chain, providing a reference standard that correlates back to the measurements and computer models. The computer modeling provides the theoretical underpinning of the design; the measurements the empirical performance; and the listening room the final voicing and aesthetic judgement of the loudspeaker.



Seat time in the sweet spot.

I spent about eight hours listening to the M9 over two days. I heard the pair of M9s by themselves, and then augmented with two Magico Titan subwoofers ($32k each). Why would the massive M9 need a subwoofer? It doesn't; the *room* needs the subwoofer, as do all rooms, even a reference-quality room such as the one in Magico's factory. The multiple sources of bass distributed throughout the room drive the room's resonant modes more uniformly for smoother and more linear low-end response.

Once the listening commenced, it was immediately apparent that the M9 was different from any other speaker I've heard, including previous Magico models. The sound had the remarkable quality of appearing from nowhere, completely untethered to the speakers. This characteristic was certainly related to the M9's completely silent background as well as its stunning spatial presentation, with wide staging and continuousness of imaging. But the M9's disappearing act went beyond these usual tropes. The impression of hearing music rather than a hi-fi system was profound. The M9 is so transparent to the music that I had the odd sensation of the speakers not being the source of the sound. Opening my eyes at the end of a piece of music, I was sometimes momentarily startled to see this pair of giants in front of me.

**Once the listening commenced, it was immediately apparent that the M9 was different from any other speaker I've heard, including previous Magico models.**

The M9 is utterly colorless; describing its specific sonic characteristics in terms of tonal balance, or what it does well and where it could be better, seems pointless; the speaker appears to have virtually no sound of its own. Magico has for years chased down one speaker-distortion mechanism after another, mechanisms that cue the brain that you are hearing a loudspeaker and not the actual musical event. With the M9, Magico has taken to the next level the concept of removing sonic artifacts, with stunning results.

The M9's bass extension, power, and weight are, as might be expected from the design, exemplary. But the bottom end also has a clarity, definition, and warmth that extends from the upper bass all the way down to the bottom-most octave. The bass character doesn't change with the register in which the instrument is playing, revealing nuances of texture and dynamics. Moreover, the bass—and the entire speaker—has a continuousness and coherence from top to bottom that further adds to the impression of not hearing a loudspeaker. Although capable of moving a massive amount of air and creating a visceral physicality in the low end, the M9 is a master of resolution, revealing fine details of timbre, dynamics, and pitch in bass instruments (try Brian Bromberg's solo acoustic instrument on his album *Wood*, for example). The midbass is wonderfully warm, rich, and physically powerful, combining weight with transient fidelity and resolution.

The M9 sounds incredibly

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and Atlantis

Liquid Hi-Fi
SC 29707
704-953-6034
liquidhifi.com
Reference
and Atlantis

Bending Wave
FL 33324
954-579-7463
bendingwaveusa.com
Reference
and Atlantis

Goodwin's
MA 02451
781-893-9000
goodwinhighend.com
Reference
and Atlantis

Supra Hi-Fi
TX 75042
972-754-8359
suprahifi.com
Atlantis

American Sound of
Canada L4E 3M7
1-905-773-7810
americansound.com
Reference
and Atlantis

wadax.eu

Magico founder Alon Wolf and I flank the M9.

clean and pure but not antiseptic or clinical. In fact, the speaker is capable of conveying tremendous harmonic warmth and richness, if those qualities are present in the recording. The sound has a liquidity that is beguiling. The M9's freedom from coloration and grain, coupled with its crystalline clarity, allows natural tone colors and textures to be rendered with a startlingly vivid realism. I listened to a lot of piano music through the M9, from solo classical, to jazz trios, to the instrument within larger ensembles, and heard some consistent and unmistakable qualities that loudspeakers rarely get right, and when they do, never to this degree. The attacks of hammers hitting the strings, particularly in the upper register, lacked the glassy "clangy" character that is so common in reproduced music. The M9 was utterly smooth and liquid, yet without diminishing the piano's fierce sense of attack and percussive quality when called for. Second, the instrument had a harmonic warmth and density of texture that simply sounded more like the real thing. The resolution of the instrument's harmonic structure was gorgeous and almost sensual; on sustained chords the tone colors were so vividly lifelike, rich, and dense in color. The M9 effortlessly resolved the way the harmonic structure subtly changed as those chords decayed. Reproduced piano often tends to sound a bit "skeletal," with a hardness on the initial attack, a lack of body and warmth, and loss (or obscuration) of fine harmonic structure that casts a patina of artificiality over the instrument. Conversely, the instrument can sound a bit thick, confused, and turgid, lacking the sense of air radiating off the soundboard. The M9 didn't veer in either direction of coloration, instead producing the most realistic reproduction of piano I've ever heard.

In the ability to resolve very fine detail, the M9 is, again, phenomenally great. I heard things in familiar recordings that were startling. The track "I Love Being Here with You" from Diana Krall's *Live in Paris* (a terrific record, by the way), is a good example. During the piano solo, I heard, for the first time, some very quiet vocalizing underneath the music. This element added more life to the music, accentuating the live nature of the performance. But beyond this element of arcane audiophile interest, the song simply brimmed with the excitement of a first-rate band kicking into gear in front of an audience. All the performances took on a heightened sense of urgency, energy, and spontaneous music-making in a way that was absolutely thrilling.

The new generation of tweeter in the M9's has taken another step forward in smoothness and lack of hardness. Even at high playback levels, with a large wind band playing at full tilt (the climax of "*The Cowboys* Overture" from *John Williams at the Movies*), the M9's top end never veered into glare. In fact, the sound remained completely composed on this track, the densest *fff* passages rendered with a sense of ease, clarity, and lack of confusion. On small jazz groups, cymbals were reproduced with a delicacy and resolution of fine inner detail (e.g., Jack DeJohnette's wonderfully sensitive playing on the title track to the live Keith Jarrett release *My Foolish Heart*). The purity and cleanliness of the treble fostered a sense of ease, of sinking into the music, with complete relaxation despite the system's overarching quality of ultra-high resolution.

**Overall, I have to say that the Magico M9 is the best-sounding loudspeaker I've heard.**

There's one more aspect of the M9 to report; the speaker has a complete and unwavering sense of effortless ease on all music. It can scale the heights of the most demanding music without a hint of congestion or confusion. It's just a natural, organic, immensely involving sound on any type of music and at any listening level.

Overall, I have to say that the Magico M9 is the best-sounding loudspeaker I've heard. It represents the ultimate realization of the accumulated knowledge and sophisticated technologies Magico has developed over the past 25 years, along with some remarkable innovations that push the M9's performance to an unprecedented level. tas

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UMAMI RED

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# Celebrated Audio Reviewer Michael Fremer Returns to *The Absolute Sound*

## Welcome Back, Michael!

TAS Editorial Staff

**Nextscreen, LLC—producers of The Absolute Sound network, the *hi-fi*+ network, and the *Winding Road* network—is pleased to announce that highly respected audio journalist Michael Fremer has joined *The Absolute Sound* network as Senior Editor.**

"Michael is well known as one of a small handful of expert reviewers of analog audio equipment in the world," said Robert Harley, Editor-In-Chief of *The Absolute Sound* magazine. "His in-depth knowledge of analog gear and production, along with his extensive experience reviewing the best speakers and electronics, makes him a perfect fit with TAS' own expert editors who focus on state-of-art equipment, including Jonathan Valin, Neil Gader, Paul Seydor, Robert E. Greene, Dick Olsher, Jacob Heilbrunn, Steven Stone, Andrew Quint, Wayne Garcia, Alan Taffel, and Anthony H. Cordesman."

**Michael is one of the small handful of expert audio reviewers.**

In addition to his return to the pages of *The Absolute Sound* magazine, where he started his reviewing career, Fremer will provide exclusive content to *The Absolute Sound* network. "We are excited that Michael will produce a series of videos from his manufacturer, recording-industry, and audio-show visits for *The Absolute Sound* channel on YouTube," said Tom Martin, CEO of Nextscreen, LLC. "In addition, we have asked Michael to produce a series of interviews for *The Absolute Sound* on YouTube, which we think will be quite entertaining for lovers of the audio arts."

In addition to this work, Fremer will be developing the analog-focused website TrackingAngle.com. Fremer said, "The relationship between TAS and TrackingAngle will be strong and one of sharing and cooperation." Specifically, Michael will share some of his TrackingAngle work with readers and viewers of *The Absolute Sound* and *hi-fi*+ networks. Martin pointed out that "Nextscreen is particularly excited that Michael wants to bring his expert coverage to all analog price points. This is in perfect harmony with our greatly expanded global efforts to reach audiophiles of all ages and stages of the audio journey."

Fremer began work with *The Absolute Sound* on June 15, so readers can expect to see the first fruits of this new relationship soon. tas

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## Munich High End Show 2022

# OUR MAN IN MUNICH

ALAN TAFFEL

**IN ANY NORMAL YEAR,** TAS would send a phalanx of writers to cover High End Munich, the largest and most important audio show in the world. This year, out of an abundance of COVID-related caution, the magazine sent a somewhat smaller contingent: me. So, you know how every year JV apologizes to exhibitors and readers that he may have missed some rooms? Please recall that sentiment this year—times five.

Nonetheless, between inhaled schnitzels and streusels, I covered a lot of ground. Which is good because there turned out to be a lot worth covering. After a two-year hiatus, manufacturers could barely contain the pent-up flood of new product releases. Further, despite the MOC's famously inhospitable acoustics, more exhibitors than usual managed to conjure up good sound.

Overlaying these achievements was a feeling of festivity that infused every centimeter of the MOC's halls and every face eddying from room to room. People were in giddy disbelief that Munich was really back. Even the near-total absence of Asian attendees, who dared not risk quarantines of up to three weeks to make the journey, couldn't dampen the mood. If that unfortunate situation lowered ticket sales by 30% compared to two years ago, you'd never know it from the packed rooms and delighted exhibitors.

And so, without further ado, here's one man's take on one mammoth audio show.

# Munich High End Show 2022

## MOST SIGNIFICANT NEW PRODUCTS

Nagra's 70th Anniversary Reference Turntable is, like all Nagra products, a real looker.

**Børresen Acoustics** will soon have a new stand-mount speaker, the **M1**, but this is no ordinary two way. The basket (frame) for the midrange/woofer driver is 3D-printed and made of pure zirconium. The company, which eschews the use of aluminum at all costs due to what it feels are non-musical mechanical properties, claims the cost of this single basket—about $13k—exceeds the combined cost of all the drivers in a Wilson XVX. (I suspect Daryl Wilson might have something to say about that.) The driver's motor system contains nearly 93 *pounds* of silver. Finally, the cone is a carbon/Nomex/titanium sandwich. With all this technology and expensive material, it's no surprise that the new model will come in at around $100k when released in the Fall.

While **Göbel's** entry model in the Divin series, the **Divin Marquis** ($89k) has become a familiar sight at recent U.S. audio shows, the complementary **Divin Sovereign** ($29.5k) was new for Munich. The huge sub uses a single 18" front-firing driver powered by an internal 2500-watt amp. The cabinet is sealed because, per Oliver Göbel, "at these frequencies, if you have a port, you're mostly just hearing the port." Oliver chose an 18" driver to compensate for the roll-off properties of the sealed box. Also, larger surface area means less excursion, which in turn reduces distortion.

Wilson Benesch's Omnium speaker heralds a more earth-friendly approach to cabinet composition.

**Wilson Benesch** made two significant introductions in Munich. First up: the **Omnium** speaker. Slotting between the **Resolution** and the flagship **Eminence** that was reviewed by Robert Harley, the product was over four years in the making, and was developed in concert with SSUCY, a pan-European R&D project, whose members include both academic and industrial entities. SSUCY's goal is to develop and commercialize bio-compatible (plant-based) materials to replace carbon-based equivalents in aerospace, automotive, and other areas. The Omnium's enclosure is partially composed of a bio-composite derived from hemp. The result is said to be extremely stiff, highly damped, and sustainable.

The English firm also went back to its turntable roots, premiering the new **GMT System®** turntable. The lust-worthy display model was a working prototype, but the production version won't be available until early 2023. The price is yet to be determined but will likely exceed $400k—and no, I did not accidentally add a zero. The GMT System strives for perfection by re-thinking every element of turntable design. For instance, the direct-drive system features a very *low*-torque motor said to virtually eliminate cogging. The tonearm is made of hollowed-out titanium. VTA is adjustable via remote control, and the whole shebang sits on a pneumatic suspension. I auditioned the GMT by playing Donald Fagen's "The Goodbye Look." Much to my surprise, the new 'table infused this familiar track with a level of energy and pace I'd never heard before. "Relentless," I wrote in my notes.

I encountered another turntable of interest in the **Nagra** room. Not only was the venerable Swiss company's **70th Anniversary Reference Turntable** built from scratch, but it's also Nagra's first turntable ever. The price is $175k, including an outboard power supply and a unipivot, carbon-fiber tonearm wired with Crystal Cable. The platter and body are made of Exium, a very dead alloy (which doesn't sound like a good thing but is), and there are two motors onboard, one optimized for stable speed and the other with high torque for quick startup. The suspension consists of springs bathed in a silicon oil.

Fresh off their triumphant launch of the 10-Series electronics, **CH Precision** was back with major upgrades to its source components. Thanks to the latest-generation DSP chips, the **C1.2 DAC/linestage** ($36k, September) now boasts 4x more processing power than the original C1. This enables features like full MQA decoding, DSD512 and PCM 768 support, and fixed point—rather than floating point—processing, which is more accurate. Cards from any C1 are compatible with the C1.2, and the upgrade story gets even better from there. Owners of current-edition C1s can trade them in for a C1.2 merely for the $4k price difference between the two. In other words, CH will give current-version C1 owners full credit for their original purchase toward a C1.2. You can't ask for more than that.

Munich was also the first public showing of the **CH Precision D1.5**, an upgrade of the famous D1 CD/SACD transport/player. The new unit has a massive, all-new transport built in-house. It's also the first transport/player I've seen that supports the new MQA CD format. The D1.5 was the mainstay of demos in the CH room, and it sounded unfailingly marvelous.

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www.psbspeakers.com/passif50

# Munich High End Show 2022

Rockport's Josh Clark introduces the new Orion, with technology similar to the flagship Lyra but in a smaller form factor and at a lower price.

In other major news, American speaker maker **Rockport** announced a scaled-down version of its award-winning flagship, the Lyra (also reviewed by RH, the lucky guy). The Lyra's enclosure is built from cast aluminum inner and outer shells with a dense epoxy between them. The new **Orion** ($133k) has the same construction, but the outer shell is made from carbon fiber rather than aluminum, which greatly lowers the manufacturing cost while retaining the advantages of this construction. The Orion features three, all-new, purpose-built drivers in a significantly smaller and $50k less-expensive package. Indeed, despite a 13" sandwich composite carbon-fiber woofer—the other drivers are a 1.25" beryllium-dome waveguide-mounted tweeter and a 7" sandwich composite carbon-fiber midrange and a 1" beryllium tweeter—and the layered cabinet construction, the Orion is virtually the same size as the popular Avior.

Another important speaker introduction came from the bespoke Swiss brand **Zellaton**, which doesn't release new models very often. In Munich, on static display, was the forthcoming **Emotion Evo**. Intended as a baby brother to the much-lauded Plural Evo, the roughly $40k Emotion is significantly less expensive. The two share the same soft-dome tweeter, but the two-way Emotion has a unique 9" mid/bass unit. I predict the Emotion Evo's décor-friendly size and shape, along with its relatively modest price (as Zellatons go) will make it a huge hit when it debuts in 1Q23.

In the **Estelon** room, visitors had the opportunity to see and hear the Estonian firm's new top model, the **Extreme Mk II** ($256k). Compared to the Mk 1, the II boasts a larger midrange voice coil and a diamond tweeter revised to obviate the need for ferrofluid damping. The speaker also uses phase-linear second-order filters top to bottom, and the crossover is now housed in its own chamber to isolate it from vibrations. The Extreme II's neatest trick is a motorized top section that can move up and down (and in and out) as needed for room optimization, while preserving time alignment.

Swiss speaker maker **Piega** made a rare update to its vaunted **Coax Series**. The coax mid/tweeter is now larger, more efficient, and stiffer than before, and its crossover point has been raised to 450Hz. That means the bass driver must handle more material, which in turn led the company to enlarge the enclosures and thicken the front panel. While the woofer is the same unit as before, Piega has changed the tuning of the passive radiators. There's also more bracing within the cabinet. In a brief audition, the new coax driver proved effortlessly smooth and extended.

Germany's own **Burmester** introduced three major new products in Munich. At about $16k, the **B28** speaker slots equidistant between the B18 and the B38. The new model, like many speakers introduced in Munich, utilizes an AMT tweeter. The other drivers are a carbon-fiber midrange and two carbon-fiber woofers. On the electronics side, Burmester launched the **216** stereo power amp, a successor to the famous 911. The unit was so new its specs weren't yet finalized. However, expect the 216 to put out roughly 450Wpc into four ohms and to cost circa $35k. Burmester also showed the **218**, which is larger, more powerful, and costlier (by an as-yet-undetermined amount) than the 216.

Another hometown favorite, **T+A**, also had a slew of new products to show at Munich. The least expensive was the company's new headphones. Since the Solitaire P reference ($6400) and Solitaire PSE ($3800) models have been killing it at dealers, the company felt encouraged to release another model more attuned to Gen-XYZ. The **Solitaire T** ($1600, available now) supports wired, Wi-Fi, and Bluetooth connectivity, and is noise canceling. In electronics premiers, the new **M200** is a mono (it's too small to call it a "monoblock") version of the swanky S200. Available in the Fall for roughly $5k, the M200 outputs 210 watts into 8 ohms and 420 watts into 4 ohms. Another electronics release was the latest addition to the superb HV (High Voltage) series. The **PSD 3100 HV** is a streaming DAC/linestage that will sell for roughly $22k. Finally, the **Solitaire 5540** is the company's new flagship speaker. It's a sealed, line-source design with a row of planar-magnetic drivers that will run $60k and is scheduled for year-end release.

Burmester introduced two amps in Munich. They were so new the specs and pricing had yet to be finalized.

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## CALL OR EMAIL TO ORDER

# Munich High End Show 2022

## AUSPICIOUS DEBUTS—SPEAKERS

When Andrew Jones helmed design at **Elac**, he focused on bringing big sound to small speakers. Those models are still in the lineup, but in Munich the emphasis was on larger models, such as the new **5509**, which will sell in the U.S. for approximately $20k. Featuring a concentric driver with an AMT tweeter, and driven by an all-Elac stack, the new speaker had a compellingly smooth demeanor.

**Audiovector**'s entry-level QR series has a new top model: the **QR7**. At just $6500/pair, the QR7 comprises dual 8" woofers, a 6" midrange, and an AMT tweeter. The speaker will be commercially available in June, and in Munich it sounded very appealing, with solid bass and smooth highs.

Next door, French speaker maker **Apertura** introduced the **Forté** (€7500/pair), a mid-range product designed to produce high-quality sound from a speaker that has low power requirements. Indeed, the new model has a very high rated sensitivity of 93dB. In Munich, the Forté was shown with a 40-watt tube amp. Unlike most Apertura models, even those below the Forté, the new speaker does not use a ribbon tweeter. Instead, with greater sensitivity foremost in mind, its designers opted for a ring radiator.

*Über*-luxe Swiss brand **Goldmund** had two new products on display. The first was an entry-level speaker, the **Pulp**. An active unit that can either be wired or connected via Bluetooth, the Pulp resembles other Bluetooth speakers, but with several exceptions. It's made of metal and finished beautifully; it has a trick motorized grille mechanism; and it will cost a cool $15k when it's released in the Fall. At the other end of the product line stands a new flagship speaker, the stunningly designed, imposingly proportioned **Gaia**. An active eight-driver system, the speaker has one super-tweeter, one dome tweeter, two high/mid drivers, two mid/low drivers, and dual rear-mounted woofers. Bucking the current trend of populating active speakers with Class D amps, each of the Gaia's drivers is paired with a 300-watt Class AB amplifier. The speaker can be fed either by Goldmund's proprietary wireless technology or via standard cables. Price is TBD (but this is Goldmund, so... not cheap) and availability is 1Q23.

**Marten**'s latest is the **Quintet 2**, available now for €62,000. The speaker is a three-way, with a trio of 6.5" bass drivers, a 5" ceramic midrange, and a 20mm diamond tweeter. There's a down-firing port, and the feet are from IsoAcoustics.

Edwin Rynveld describes the new **Siltech Minissimo** as a new type of active/hybrid speaker. The speaker itself is passive, as is the crossover, which is concealed inside the speaker's pedestal. But the crossover is followed by an active buffer amplifier said to eliminate the variability of speaker performance at different sound levels and with different source material. Played with Siltech electronics, the new Minissimo sounded lively and able to produce a scale that belied its petite proportions. Available this Fall for approximately $20k.

A live jazz saxophonist featured prominently in a thought-provoking demo jointly presented by darTZeel and Stenheim.

## AUSPICIOUS DEBUTS—ELECTRONICS

At every trade show I've attended recently, **Lampizator** tube DACs have been everywhere. In Munich, their star turn was in their own room, shared with **Gershman Acoustics**. There they unveiled the **Atlantic2 TRP DAC**, an all-tubed, fully balanced, dual-mono "digital engine" available in standard or gold finishes and with single-ended or balanced topology. TRP stands for "tube roller's paradise," so dubbed because users can choose their favorite tubes from a wide variety of options. There's also an optional volume control/linestage module with remote control. The price is €6k–10k, depending on configuration.

**MSB** showcased its new **Digital Director**. Not a DAC, but meant to work in conjunction with one, the Director is a digital isolation device that removes jitter and other noise from an MSB DAC-bound digital signal. The price ranges from $14,500 to $27,500 for the top model. Available this Fall.

Digital specialist **Innuos** showed its **Next-Gen power supply**, an optional upgrade to the **Statement music server** ($16.7–$19.5k without the Next-Gen PSU, $21.7–$24.5k with). Customers with the standard Statement can take advantage of a factory upgrade for $5k. I suggest they do so, because in a demo the difference I heard in transient detail and soundstage width wrought by the new PSU was far from subtle.

Aside from a new turntable (see below), **Pro-Ject's** main release was the tiny **MaiA S3 integrated amp** (€599, available now). Despite its diminutive size, the Maia somehow finds room for eight inputs: three line-level analog, one phono, and three digital. It delivers 40Wpc and has a headphone output to boot. The phono input is moving magnet only, but if that

New for 2022

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# Munich High End Show 2022

doesn't suit your needs you can complement the S3 with the matching **S3B** phonostage (€399, now), which offers mm and mc support, balanced output, and settable loading and gain.

## AUSPICIOUS DEBUTS—ANALOG

**Pro-Ject's** biggest news was the **Debut Pro S** turntable. Much like the existing Debut Pro, the S has an MDF chassis and an aluminum 'arm and platter. However, the S differs in its use of a 10" 'arm versus the standard 'table's 8.6" unit. The S will be available in 3Q22 for approximately €1250.

**Ortofon** unveiled the **MC Diamond cartridge**, its new flagship. Titanium-bodied, with a diamond cantilever, non-magnetic armature, and an entirely new suspension, the new model will put out 0.2mV. It'll be available in August for roughly $10k.

To complement its new 70th Anniversary Reference Turntable, **Nagra** introduced the **Reference Cartridge** ($22k) and the **HD Phono**, an all-tube phonostage that was the focus of a three-year effort. Its price is TBD but will be somewhere above $80k when it launches in November.

## AUSPICIOUS DEBUTS—ACCESSORIES

**Nordost** was showing off its **QNet network switch**. QNet ($3200, available now) sports an aluminum case to tamp down RF interference, and spaced Ethernet ports to reduce crosstalk. Want to make it sound even better? Nordost offers the **QSource linear power supply** for $2750. I've requested this pair for review.

**Crystal Cable** announced an entirely new line, the **Future Dream 22**. The number 22 denotes a dual-wire, dual metallurgy—monocrystal silver plus a silver/gold alloy—design. The Future Dream 22 line slots in the middle of CC's catalog, and while prices vary, they generally start at $2k for short lengths. The line includes a speaker cable, power cord, USB cable, interconnects, and phono cable. Ethernet is "on the way," but the others are available now.

Not to be outdone, **Siltech** debuted *three* new cable lines at Munich. Referred to overall as the Royal Crown Series, the lines are the **Royal Single Crown**, **Royal Double Crown**, and, you guessed it, the **Royal Triple Crown**. Prices start at $2k, $5k, and $10k, respectively. The entire series is built on monocrystal silver, and as you move up the line you get more conductive material and better shielding. All Royal Crown cables are available in July.

## TOP TEN BEST-SOUNDING ROOMS

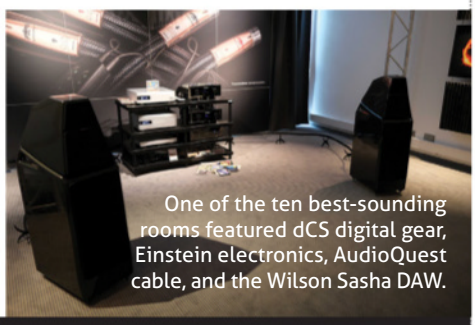
If you're an exhibitor who couldn't make good sound in Munich, that doesn't mean you had bad gear or even a poor setup. It just means you fell victim to the MOC's notoriously dreadful acoustics. Paper-thin walls and glass ceilings do not a good listening space make. But this year an unusual number of exhibitors found a way to overcome these obstacles and deliver sound that any audiophile would be proud to have at home. Here are the ten best rooms I encountered, in no particular order:

- **MBL** showcased what is, for them, a scaled-down system. As in Florida, the **101 Xtreme II** speakers anchored the setup, but this time the electronics were midrange rather than flagship level. Despite that, I found the sound in Munich far more natural and appealing than it was at FLAX. Due to the more modest amps, the speakers didn't exhibit quite the dynamic slam of which they're capable; but thanks to a better room than the double-auditorium setup at FLAX, the highs in Munich were much smoother and the overall sound was more coherent. Meanwhile, there was the usual phenomenal imaging and depth these omnis always deliver.

- Although the mighty Magico M6 could be heard in the Soulution room, **Magico** took a gamble this year and gave the far more accessible **A5** the spotlight in its own room. I'm sure everyone reading this report would be disappointed if it didn't include a story, normally provided by JV, about how Magico's room sounded disappointing early in the show but turned around later. I'm happy to provide one.

  On the first day of the show, the A5's sound, as driven by **Pilium** electronics, was lively and engaging, but spoiled by a pervasive graininess. The culprit, discovered that evening by an equally dissatisfied Alon Wolf, was an ungrounded DAC. When I returned a day later, the sound was entirely free of grain. Furthermore, this system offered vivid proof that the A5 is not only a great speaker and a superb value, but it possesses a sense of musical freedom that's especially beguiling. So, there it is: this year's Magico ugly-duckling-to-swan tale. You're welcome.

- You could hear **Wilson's** heavy hitter, the XVX, in the Nagra suite, but to my ears the **Sasha DAW** in the **dCS/Einstein/AudioQuest** room (and elsewhere, see below) stole the show. Ensconced in a space that proved perfect for the speaker's size, the DAW sounded completely relaxed yet revealing, with superb imaging and transients.



One of the ten best-sounding rooms featured dCS digital gear, Einstein electronics, AudioQuest cable, and the Wilson Sasha DAW.

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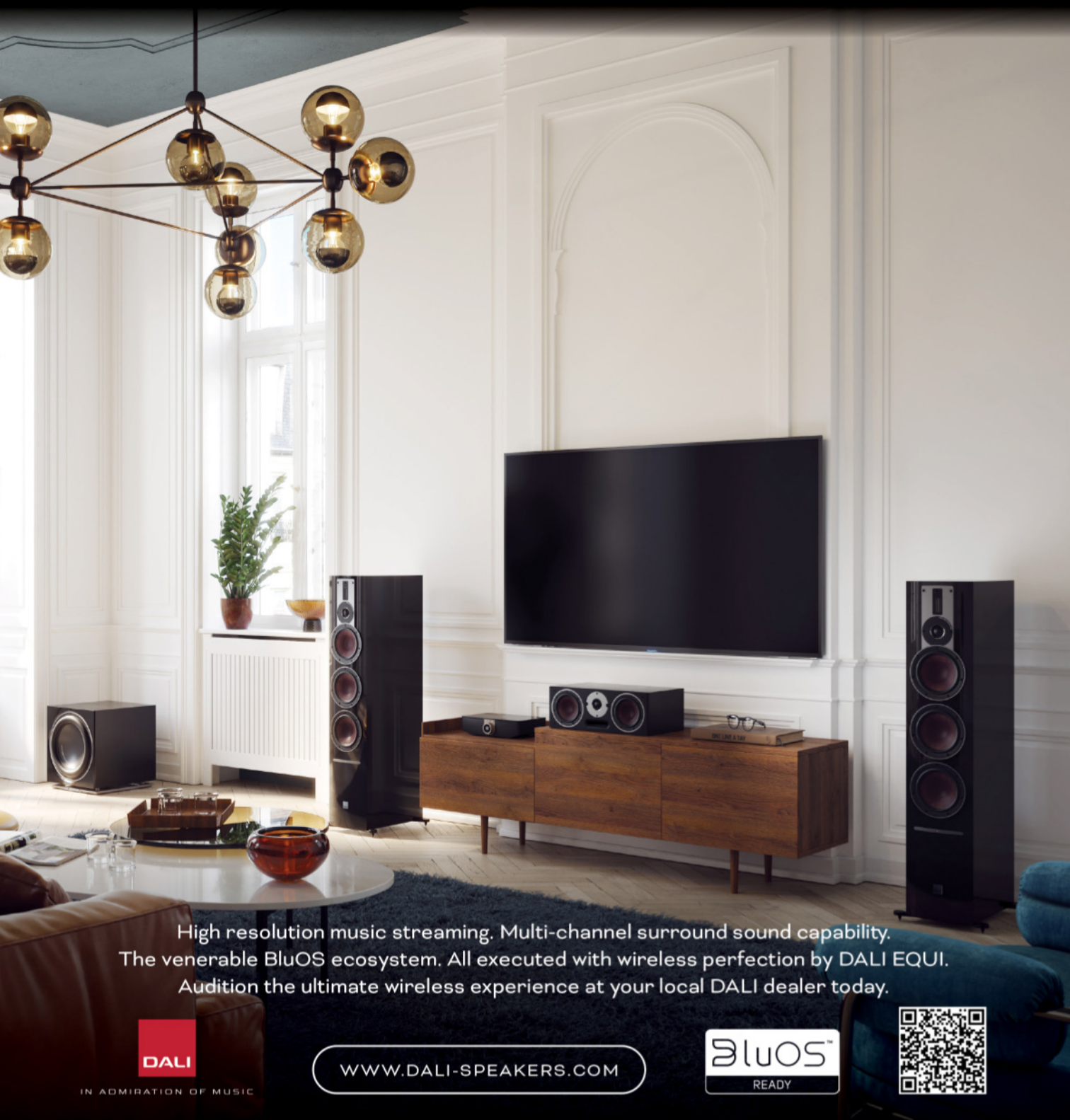

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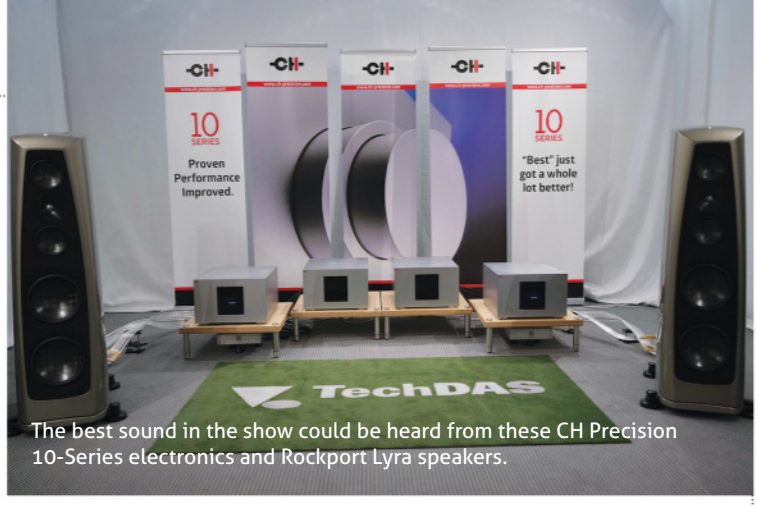
## Munich High End Show



The best sound in the show could be heard from these CH Precision 10-Series electronics and Rockport Lyra speakers.

- The modestly sized **Wilson Sasha DAW** scored again in the **Nordost** room. This time it was driven by **Dan D'Agostino Progression** integrated amp. You know how some systems just sound "right" on initial hearing, with no thought or analysis required? This was one such system. Here, in addition to their other attributes, the Wilsons offered killer bass incongruent with their modest stature.

- The **Göbel** room, with a pair of the **Divin Marquis** mains and another pair of the new **Divin Sovereign** subs, plus **True Life Audio** electronics, proved both a winning combination and the company's best recent trade show outing. Not only did the main speakers disappear, but so did the gigantic subs. Nor was there any trace of discontinuity between the two. Though capable of large-scale sound, it was the system's subtle dynamics and tonal nuances that really enhanced its musicality.

- In the **CH Precision/TechDAS/Rockport** room, with the company's recently upgraded source components, **10-Series** electronics, Rockport **Lyra** speakers and **Nordost Odin** cable, the impression of actual musicians being in the room was spookily realistic. At one point, Buddy Holly stood there, on a physical stage, and sang with natural warmth. And that was from a Red Book CD!

- **Living Voice** room. This anti-trade show room was all about the music. A balm for tired ears and an elixir for the musically inclined. (See Sidebar: "Sorry, Not for Sale.")

- **Rockport's s**ystem was anchored by **Avior** speakers, powered by **Absolare** electronics and sourced by **Request Audio**'s streaming DAC. This was another system, like the CH Precision room that also featured a Rockport speaker (coincidence? I think not), that was almost tangible in its realism. The sound was refreshingly unpretentious but not polite. This combo could really swing when asked to.

- The **Kharma** room sounded like Kharma usually does, which is wonderful. Backed by Kharma and **dCS** electronics and a **Euphony** streamer, the big **Exquisite Grand** speakers amply displayed the specialness of Kharma's midrange. Add in earthy bass and startling dynamics and you've got a system deserving of a top ten slot.

- At exactly 10:01am every day, a swarm of visitors dashed across the MOC floor on a non-stop course to the **Burmester** booth. Their mission: to score tickets to one of the by-reservation-only demos taking place throughout the day. Why were these seats so coveted? Was Burmester doing something unique? Or was it just that they were hometown favorites?

I had to find out. On the last day I caught the last show—but only because the nice PR people interceded on my behalf. I have no idea what the presenter was saying, because this was the only room where the language spoken was German. Perhaps that was the draw. Also, the sound was

## The Munich Playlist

**WHENEVER** I was in a room playing a good-sounding piece of music with which I was unfamiliar—or an unfamiliar recording of music I knew—I Shazamed it. For those of you not familiar with Shazam, it's an app that, when instructed, listens to currently playing music and within seconds identifies it. Not just the piece of music, but the recording as well. The mind boggles at the computing power needed to perform this feat, but it works amazingly well, with few "Sorry, no matches."

Handily, the app keeps a history of everything you've Shazamed. So, when you're done with a show, you have what is effectively a playlist of all the great-sounding music you heard. Here's my playlist from this year's High End Munich, in no order other than when I encountered each piece. Just search each of these titles on Tidal or Qobuz and you can make your own Munich playlist. I did this on Qobuz and made my playlist public. So, to make things even easier, you can just go on Qobuz and search for a playlist called "Munich 2022 Discoveries." It contains all the tracks below that are available on Qobuz, which is most of them.

- "Liberty"—Anette Askvik
- "Fields of Gold"—Eva Cassidy
- "Walking on the Moon"—Yuri Honing Trio
- "Soothing"—Laura Marling
- "Diaraby"—Ali Farka Toure and Ry Cooder
- Liszt "Piano Sonata in B Minor"—Nelson Goerner
- "Caronte"—Apparat
- Beethoven Symphony No. 7, 2nd Movement—Bayerisches Staatsorchester
- "Prelude"—Vikingur Olafsson
- "That Don't Make It Junk"—Leonard Cohen
- "True Love Ways"—Buddy Holly, *From the Original Master Tapes*
- Mahler Symphony No. 2, Michael Tilson Thomas
- *Sketches of Seasons*, Atzko Kohashi & Eddy Koopman

# Munich High End Show 2022

excellent. The system was the beautiful **111** music server, the new **218** stereo power amp, a **217** turntable, and a pair of big **BC150** speakers. The amps displayed superhuman grip over the speakers, and the sound was exceedingly spacious, especially on analog material.

Honorable mentions go to **Estelon, Gershman, Burmester,** and **Børresen,** all of whom had admirable sound that just missed the top ten. As you can see, it was an embarrassment of riches.

## NON-AUDIO NEWS

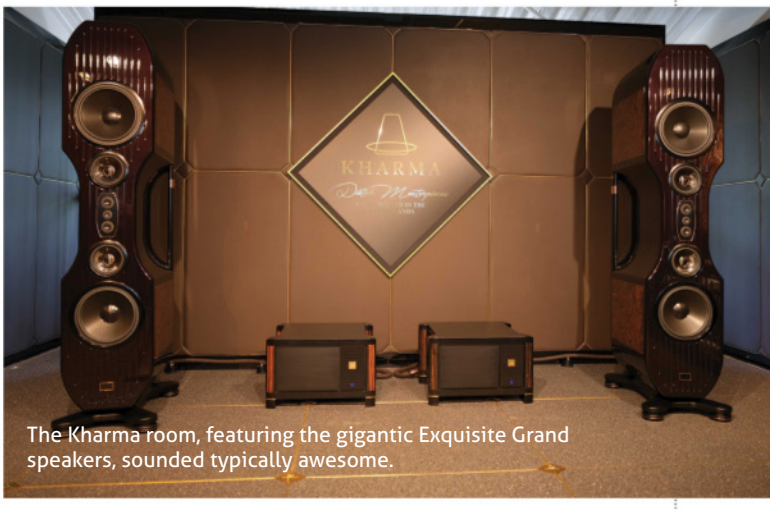
You can now get a **Linn Sondek LP12** turntable in any color you like. Just give them the color code when you order your 'table, and Linn will do the rest. In Munich, Linn was showing the LP12 in a robin's egg blue, which to my eyes clashed with the 'table's conservative ethos. But the point was made.

Smack dab between Halls 3 and 4, right where you'd expect a food court at any U.S. convention venue, Munich's MOC instead has a biergarten. A major advance, I'd say.

Did I mention the lack of effective air conditioning in the MOC? Between the 80-plus-degree weather outside and the glass-ceilinged atriums creating a greenhouse effect inside, the A/C struggled to cope. I felt sorry for the many distributors and agents who, eager to make a good impression, dressed in suit and tie. Rivulets of perspiration were everywhere you looked.

After several years of retreat and retrenchment in the wake of founder and guiding light Dieter **Burmester's** death, the company has clearly found its mojo again. In Munich, it displayed a revived energy, many significant new products, even a more modern sound. Welcome back, old friend!

All Americans who attended Munich risked enforced quarantine if they tested positive for COVID within 24 hours of their flight home. Several individuals, and a few entire companies, fell victim. As I write this, some are still in Munich.



The Kharma room, featuring the gigantic Exquisite Grand speakers, sounded typically awesome.

## Sorry, Not for Sale

**THERE'S** a French company making elegant, McIntosh-influenced components, complete with sexy backlit front panels. They offer a full range of products. The electronics are hybrids with tubed front ends and solid-state amplification. The company places a premium on versatility, such as an unusually wide variety of connection ports for the preamp. And the sound is lovely, especially considering that prices are down to earth. Separates top out at $3k apiece.

Interested? So was I. But while **Advance Paris** is fairly well known in Europe, it isn't available in the States. The company is seeking U.S. distribution. Any takers out there?

Journalists at audio shows routinely ask other journalists what rooms they recommend, in order not to miss something special. In Munich, the most frequent answer to that question was the **Living Voice** room. So, I went there, despite never having heard of the brand, and indeed found something special.

In a way, the room was the opposite of every other at the show. There was no attempt to "out hi-fi" other rooms. Rather than the focus being all about the sound, it was all about the music. This was a system to melt your heart because there was *nothing* getting in the way—sonically speaking—of that happening. Yet this wasn't one of those systems where musicality comes at the expense of sonic performance. Rather, one got the feeling that all the music was there—and that nothing was missing from the sound, either.

What was creating this magic? First and foremost, **Living Voice Auditorium OBX-RW4 speakers** (€18,500). These are LV's top of the Auditorium line. (The company also makes a line of horn speakers.) They feature outboard crossovers to eliminate parasitic vibrations and are designed for purity and high sensitivity (94dB). Bringing home the latter point, in Munich the speakers were driven by an 8Wpc 300B SET amplifier. LV's Kevin Scott also went above and beyond in terms of setup. As he does every year at Munich, he brought his own power—in the form of a rack of batteries and an inverter—to the show. Talk about minimizing sonically deleterious factors; Scott even bypassed the MOC's noisy AC.

Sadly, Living Voice isn't available in North America. Yet. Like Advance Paris, the company is actively searching for U.S. distribution. My advice to any would-be distributors: Jump on this opportunity. LV is unique in sound, performance, and value. It's going to be a hit on every shore where it's sold.

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# SHOW REPORT

## Munich High End Show 2022

## BEST OF SHOW

**Best Sound (Cost no object):** The **CH Precision/TechDAS/Rockport** room was the only one that conjured a convincing apparition of live musicians. What more need be said?

**Best Sound (For the money):** **Scansonic's** room was moderately priced (for this show, at least) yet made lovely music. The **MB6** speakers, which go for just $11k, supported by a modest **Moon Audio** stack, had an easy-going, unforced presentation. The ribbon tweeter and small mid/bass drivers were blazingly fast, and there was more depth than you usually hear at shows.

**Most Significant Product Introduction:** The **Wilson Benesch Omnium** speaker augers an era where plant-based materials, which are far better for the planet, not only replace their carbon equivalents but improve speaker performance as well.

**Best Demo:** The **CH Precision** "Fine-Tuning a System" seminar. If your timing was right, you could catch a one-hour seminar wherein Roy Gregory coaxed Stirling Trayle to reveal the juicy details behind his setup of the best-in-show system. Their message was that the CH 10-Series' very fine-grain tunability really matters. And, boy, did they bring that point home.

In particular, they demonstrated the effects of the CH's ability to adjust the ratio between global to local feedback, which allows optimization of the amp for the specific speaker, from 0 to 100% in 1% increments. Playing a simple solo piano CD, they showed how unhappy the Lyra speakers were with a mere 5% of global feedback. The playing sounded sloppy and lethargic. As the global feedback was reduced, 1% at a time, the performance gradually snapped into focus and gained vigor. With this trend, everyone present predicted 0% global feedback to be the optimal setting—but it wasn't. At the 1% mark, everything clicked into place. At 0%, there was a thinning of timbral information and other detractions. It was clear to all that 1% was the correct setting.

Most electronics don't provide any means of optimizing their interface with a given speaker, let alone in such fine increments. Even lower-level CH gear has courser settings. The demo proved that 1% increments is not only useful, but in this case it was essential. All in all, this was a demo that had a point to make, and it did so convincingly.

**Most Significant Trend:** I saw more **Air-Motion Transformer** (AMT) tweeters at this show than at the last several shows combined. The AMT is notable for its extension and high sensitivity. Unfortunately, in several instances the driver sounded strident.

**Most Coveted Product:** **Wilson Benesch** again, this time with the supremely lust-worthy—and unimaginably costly—**GMT System® turntable**. Pictures don't do it justice. Sounded great, too. tas


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# *THE ABSOLUTE SOUND'S* 2022 GOLDEN EAR AWARDS

*The Absolute Sound*'s Golden Ear Awards is the annual feature in which our staff and freelance writers choose those components that stand out from the competition. Some of these components are longstanding references that have withstood the test of time. Others are newfound favorites destined to become classics. In either case, the products selected for a Golden Ear Award are special.

Unlike our Editors' Choice Awards (a compendium of every product we recommend, chosen by consensus of the senior editorial staff), Golden Ear Awards allow each writer to express his or her individual views on which components are truly great—and why. The diversity of products selected here reflects not just the industry at large, but also each writer's quest for the absolute sound.—**Robert Harley**

Matt Clott, Anthony H. Cordesman, Neil Gader, Wayne Garcia, Robert E. Greene, Robert Harley, Jacob Heilbrunn, Andre Jennings, Drew Kalbach, Muse Kastanovich, Kirk Midtskog, Dick Olsher, Andrew Quint, Paul Seydor, Steven Stone, Alan Taffel, and Jonathan Valin

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## Wilson Audio Alexx V Loudspeaker
**$135,000**

A Golden Ear award sometimes doesn't quite express the wonder and awe I experienced while reviewing a product. My review intentionally omitted any direct listening notes about specific reference recordings because my time with the Alexx V left me feeling an intense obligation to write a review that was special, that rendered a sense of entertainment and engagement in line with what the Alexx V represents. Considering the price point, size, and physical prowess of the speaker, it is blessed with the luxury of minimal restrictions in design, parts, and fabrication. It stands 63" tall and weighs 500 pounds per side, utilizes five drivers, and is finished in a technicolor dream coat of Wilson's newest state-of-the-art paint. Proper setup (many hours of setup) required correct measurements, meticulous placement, and precise adjustment of the four separate cabinets to deliver sound waves of perfectly time-aligned audio sorcery. The music simply flows in natural tonal layers of textural complexity and grace with a sense of ease and effortlessness akin to waves upon an ocean shore—such power, yet such serenity. The Alexx V delves deeper into the soul of the music than any speaker I have had in my room. Yes, a Golden Ear is nice. But I would suggest an Unobtainium, Adamantium, or Vibranium Ear award for the Alexx V. If required, however, to adhere to the current limitations of our physical world, I would settle for a Diamond-Studded Platinum Ear award. They were that good, and they still are. The review pair is my new reference. (327)

**Matt Clott**

## VooDoo Power Cables
**$2900/$3450/$4700**

While I am still in the middle of my review listening period, I am so impressed with these power cords that I'm awarding them a Golden Ear before the proverbial pen has hit paper. With Air Dragon on the server, Air Phoenix on DAC and preamp, and a double dose of Air Tesla on my dual-mono amplifier I am attaining improved levels of resolution, better 3-D rendering of instruments/vocals, and a boost in dynamics and presence over my previous reference Shunyata Sigma power loom. The quality of the products is Fabergé level, and they are enormously flexible, which can be a huge issue with reference power cables due to their volume and mass. Stay tuned for the full review. (Forthcoming)

## Taiko Audio Extreme Music Server
**$34,000**

Ignore the aircraft-grade-aluminum enclosure with enormous heat sinks. Ignore the 6000 holes drilled into the top plate of the chassis to attenuate resonance. Ignore the linear power supply with 400VA transformer, Lundahl chokes, and 700,000µF of Mundorf and Duelund capacitors. Ignore the two-microprocessor architecture, designed to provide Roon with its own microprocessing environment for software tasks, while isolating the music engine on a separate dedicated microprocessor. Ignore that the Extreme is a music server that weighs a massive 99 pounds. Even ignore the fact that the Extreme is engineered and built (in The Netherlands) from the ground up to optimize the playback of streaming music as well as natively stored files. Oh, you might as well also ignore the fact that Taiko is constantly upgrading its own native software to optimize Roon and outperform its previous generation music software, while also providing a 100% reliable environment. What you can't ignore is the fact that this music server sounds like music without a hint of digital artifact and does so better than any other digital source I have ever heard. The Taiko Extreme got me closer to what was recorded and the venue it was recorded in then any source but the best analog rigs I have been exposed to. It is expensive, but this is a supreme case of "you get what you pay for." (Not reviewed)

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- Robert Harley, *The Absolute Sound*, July/August 2019

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## Legacy Wavelet II Processor
**$7950**

Yes, I gave the original Wavelet a Golden Ear Award in 2020, and I'm repeating it this year, at the expense of outstanding components like the Van Alstine DVA M225 monoblock power amplifier. I'm giving it a second award for two reasons. First, I keep coming back to the fact that it provides an amazing amount of help with virtually any speaker in dealing with what now may be the worst component in my system: my main listening room. Frequency compensation is only part of the story. Thanks to the correction of reflections, the improvements in soundstage detail are equally important. Best of all, you can use the Legacy Wavelet with virtually any brand and model of speaker. Second, I keep hoping that if I mention it often enough, Robert Harley will send me a major competitive challenger to try out. Seriously, I believe that digital correction will become the wave of the future, but so far, it seems more of a ripple. (287)

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## PS Audio FR30 Loudspeaker
**$28,500**

I'd quietly sworn to myself that, after reviewing so many outstanding speakers for TAS, I wouldn't buy any more and would stick with my Legacy Aeris. Well...chalk up one more resolution I've broken this year. The FR30 has amazing bass and far more realism and definition than mere room rattling. Its styling is ultramodern but so far has drawn almost universal praise. What really counts, however, is the smoothness and accuracy of its overall timbe and frequency response. It also offers truly superb soundstaging and a wide listening area. If you can audition it, do so but bring the most detailed and demanding recording you can and one with the most demanding midrange and treble possible. I should confess that I have kept part of my resolution. I set up my Legacy Aeris speakers in a second listening room. (Having your children get old enough to marry does have some benefits.) (Forthcoming)

**Anthony H. Cordesman**

## Technics SU-R1000 Reference Class Integrated Amplifier
**$9499**

Having said this, my final selection is the Technics SU-R100. Its phono cartridge optimizer is another demonstration of what digital correction and processing can do—even to the front-end component that most audiophiles treat as anti-digital. I think it does a very good job of getting the best out of a given cartridge, even though its "English" instructions have their limits. More broadly, it has one of the best-sounding digital amplifiers I've encountered and a very-good-sounding set of digital coax and optical inputs. Neutral rather than warm, it has lots of detail and really good dynamics for a unit of 150Wpc (8 ohms) to 300Wpc (4 ohms) output power. Also, it is a compact solution that offers the capabilities that normally require three separate components—no need to invest in interconnects between such components—and it is priced at a very affordable level for a design this advanced. (317)

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## Lumin S1 Audiophile Network Player
**$12,000**

Not too long ago the useful shelf life of a digital-audio component was notoriously short. The ground beneath performance and musicality was shifting as rapidly as innovations to D/A conversion, sampling rates, and formats occurred. The Lumin S1 is one of the new breed of network players that in my view represented the long-anticipated maturation of this segment. With four ESS SABRE32 Reference DAC chips, a revised clocking system, plus dual Lundahl LL7401 output transformers, the S1's reproduction of music is relieved of all tension, becoming warmer, weightier, more present, open, and airy in sound. Bass response is pitch perfect and saturated in complex textures and resonances. Upper harmonics and decay are more naturally resolved and, perhaps most telling, the soundstage is far more dimensional. I've also noted previously that Lumin made certain that its products were well supported with regular over-the-air software and firmware updates, including, most recently, the new Leedh processor—an advanced, digital, volume-adjustment algorithm that eliminates rounding errors and, in so doing, gives owners the option of playback without a traditional preamplifier Although the S1 was recently replaced by Lumin's X1, it is still available and typically at a reduced price–which makes it even more of a bargain. Even now, the Lumin S1 draws the listener closer to the recorded event than ever before. (248)

**Neil Gader**

## MBL 126 Loudspeaker
**$12,900 ($1390, stands)**

It only takes one look—MBL Radialstrahler loudspeakers are one of the great conversation starters in all high-end audio. Everyone I know remembers where they were the first time they heard them. Perhaps the most startling entry in the MBL line is the 126, a three-way omni-directional stand-mount. It is MBL's most petite speaker, but what it offers is anything but diminutive. First, there's musicality and transparency in abundance. On top of that is astounding spatiality—sonics that can only be characterized as sweeping in ambience retrieval, with 3D-like immersion and seamless top-to-bottom response. As only an omni can, the MBL 126 approaches the complex relationship between imaging, soundstaging, and envelopment in ways direct-radiating transducers hint at but rarely attain. Orchestral music assumes a naturalism and spine-tingling immediacy akin to the real thing. Low-level resolution and sensitivity to dynamic gradients abound. It's the superb, carbon-fiber, radial mid and tweeter drivers that spin the sonic silk—both are grainless, airy, and harmonious. Crafted and finished with precision and taste, though small of footprint the MBL 126 makes a grand statement. (320)

## Clearaudio Charisma V2 Cartridge
**$2000**

Promoted as founder Peter Suchy's "moving-magnet masterpiece," the Charisma V2 confirms in the listening that this claim is no exaggeration. With a mass-loaded, low-resonance, ebony-wood body, Charisma employs top-notch features like the same boron cantilever and double-polished Gyger S stylus found in the legendary Goldfinger Statement mc. But it's the raw musicality of Charisma that had me spinning LPs like a demented DJ. Naturalistic and detailed, Charisma offers up classic mid-range bloom and image stability, plus a full palette of tonal colors, dynamic electricity, and top-end sweetness. As with its vaunted moving-coil brethren, it resolves even finer gradations of light and air in the upper octaves, all the while maintaining a neutral balance. There are no tonal dead spots, and tracking is unshakably excellent. Costly moving coils tend to grab all the headlines in high-end circles, but their low output generally requires pricey step-up devices, which means your wallet takes an additional hit. However, with its real-world output of 3.6mV, a Charisma means you're likely good-to-go with an existing phonostage. Charisma…either you've got it or you don't. This cartridge has got it. (284)

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## Wayne Garcia

### Magico M9 Loudspeaker
**$750,000**

Although I spent but a single hour listening to Alon Wolf's latest flagship, the M9, at the company's impressive Hayward, California, facility, it takes mere moments to realize that the M9 is one of the world's great speakers.

Of course, any speaker with an eye-popping three-quarter-million-dollar price tag had damn well better snag such an endorsement. But for me, more often than not, giant, no-holds-barred designs, no matter how impressive, still sound like giant loudspeakers more than they do live music.

And giant the M9 certainly is. Standing seven-feet tall and weighing a thousand pounds per side, it is both a remarkable feat of engineering and a striking piece of industrial design. As I said in my initial report, "I can't recall any other speaker in my experience so lacking its own signature; one so breathtakingly pure and uncolored, so free of smear, hangover, driver and cabinet noise and coloration, one so stunningly coherent across such a complete frequency range—this, mind you, while sporting pairs of 15" woofers."

Moreover, although one expects such a design to effortlessly play at concert-hall levels and convincingly recreate concert-hall size, I was perhaps more impressed that the M9 can be beautiful, even delicately intimate, when played softly with scaled-down music. Add it all up and Magico's M9 doesn't come across as sounding like an impressive piece of hi-fi gear, but rather as a component that despite its size, cost, and sophistication quickly disappears. (Reviewed this issue)

### Magnepan 1.7i Loudspeaker
**$2795**

I was hooked. It was roughly 1973, I was a 17-year-old budding audiophile and had just heard Cat Stevens' "Morning Has Broken" played back over a pair of three-paneled Magneplanar Tympani 1's. Whatever that model's imperfections were, to my ears they were seriously overshadowed by that magical sensation that the music wasn't coming from boxes, which of course it wasn't, but being conjured in that very room.

Not having the space or coin for those unwieldly four-feet wide beasts, I wound up purchasing a pair of Magnepan's more manageable, but still magical MG IIs.

Over the ensuing years I've owned various Maggie models, sold a fair share during my days in retail audio, and continue to recommend them to friends. So, when my 1.7s decided to give up the ghost after a dozen years of hard service, it wasn't difficult for me to stick with what I know and love by ordering a pair of that model's updated version, the 1.7i.

What I was unprepared for, however, was just how much better the "i" edition is from what I'd lived with for so long. In classic Magnepan fashion (via deadpan Marketing Director Wendell Diller), the technical differences between plain old 1.7 and 1.7i versions are...elusive. Both are three-way "quasi-ribbon" designs and so on, but the latest model is more coherent still, offers better bass, a richer midband, and even more of that disappearing act that we Maggie lovers are so drawn to. Moreover, these remain one of the finest values in audio. In fact, they are steals. (313)

### Ramar Record Brush
**$340**

Let's face it (unless your friends are all audiophiles), most regular people would think you're crazy to spend $340 on a record brush. Even I took a deep breath before placing my order for this sexy bit of German craftsmanship. But as Neil Gader reported in Issue 326, the Ramar's mix of multiple rows of carbon fiber and goat's hair bristles, combined with a larger than usual felt pad, seems to do a noticeably better job at dust removal than the competition. You'll still want some sort of record-cleaning machine, but the Ramar ensures the smoothest possible playback surface thereafter. And a nifty stylus-cleaning brush completes the package. (324)

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## Robert E. Greene

### Pear Audio Blue Odar Turntable with Cornet 3 Tonearm
**$17,500**

If you want to play records, this is the way to go in my view. (If you are totally focused on correct pitch, you could look for a used Nakamichi disc-centering turntable; otherwise, this is the one.) All the Pear Audio designs of Peter Mezek aim at the same goals of silence, solidity, absence of micro-speed variations, and absence of grit, grain, and resonance effects. In short, they are designed to reproduce what is actually on the record—and, of course, there are some definite things on it. One of the less expensive Pear Blue setups will likely get you close to the ultimate that the Odar/Cornet 3 combination represents. But if you want to go for the best, here it is. Typical analog playback reviews are usually "yes and then again no." This one is all "yes." The Blue Odar is different and better at a price that is lower than other super-tables. (328)

### Schiit Audio Loki Max Analog Equalizer
**$1500**

You need this, even if you think your system is already neutral or even if it actually is. Recordings do not show up perfectly balanced in any precise sense. Even though the people who made a recording heard in monitoring exactly what they had in mind, their monitoring system almost surely does not match your playback system exactly! This remote-controlled device is effectively completely transparent, doing nothing except alter frequency response and make the associated minimum phase changes. You can move the balance of each recording around to fit how it fits your system and how loudly you want to play it back. (Volume level affects perceived balance.) The device is easy to use, easy to the point that you can dial in it very fast for each recording. And there is a bypass button, so you can instantly check what you did. With only six bands of eq, the Loki is not designed to fix speaker/room problems—for that you need more bands, a lot more, or parametric with variable Q. But for the day-to-day fixing up of recordings, six bands are enough to correct the things that are most likely to need correcting. And being able to do so becomes indispensable. Take control of your life in a way that far transcends the usual audio accessories or tweaks, in a way that really counts, as you will find when you switch even small corrections in and out. You'll be glad you did. (Forthcoming)

### Polk T50 Loudspeaker
**$298**

The tiny Polks benefit from EQ'ing (a 1/3-octave analog EQ device will be fine for this)—to remove a peak at around 1kHz and pull the treble down above 5kHz. This done, these inexpensive floorstanding speakers will produce a surprisingly accurate and musical sound with a good top end, adequate dynamic range, convincing bass extension beyond the scope of mini-speakers. If you must have even deeper bass extension, you could add a subwoofer (ideally multiple subwoofers—the best way to get ideal bass in actual rooms (for which, see my Golden Ear 2021 Award to the Audio Kinesis Swarm). But if you can live without the bottom octave, with bass adequate for almost all music, these speakers, properly EQ'd, will give you remarkable sound for minimal money. (Not reviewed, replaced by the TX50)

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Alan Taffel, Issue #330

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# ABSOLARE

## Hybrid Stereo Amplifier

'Amazingly, there was no hint of transistors in the Hybrid's sound; it has astonishing liquidity of timbre, is utterly grain-free, and projects a sense of presence that sounds very much like the best SET amplifiers. The Hybrid creates a directness of musical expression—of hearing nothing between you and the music—that is unique among solid-state amps, in my experience. That directness of expression fosters an intimacy with the music and performers that is seductive. The Hybrid goes beyond "hi-fi" to mediate a deep connection with musical meaning in a way that defies sonic analysis.'

The Absolute Sound, Robert Harley, December 2021

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## CH Precision L10 Dual Monaural Linestage Preamplifier and M10 Two-Channel Reference Power Amplifier
**$76,000 (two-chassis L10), $132,000 (four-chassis dual monaural L10); $104,000 (stereo M10), $198,000 (per pair of M10 monoblocks)**

CH Precision's L10 preamplifier and M10 power amplifier are the highest realization of the Swiss company's technology, build-quality, and musical aesthetic. They combine unprecedented set-up flexibility and control with simply stunning sound quality. For example, the two-chassis stereo power amplifier can be configured for stereo operation (300Wpc), or in two different monoblock configurations, or for passive bi-amplification or active bi-amplification (the latter with the addition of a plug-in board). The ability to independently adjust the amount of local and global feedback from the listening seat through CH's control app allows the amplifiers to be precisely dialed-in for your loudspeakers. Sonically, the 10 Series has a pristine rendering and exquisite resolution of fine detail without sounding analytical. The highly detailed rendering for which CH Precision is known is there, but accompanied by body, timbral warmth, and dense tone color—a compelling combination. These electronics let you hear every nuance of musical expression and interaction between musicians in a way that is simply thrilling. A *tour de force* in amplification and my reference electronics. (323)

**Robert Harley**

## Lumin P1 Network Player/Preamplifier
**$10,000**

A lot of thought obviously went into Lumin's latest music server; its extensive feature set delivers exactly the right functionality for today's music systems—all from a compact one-box component. This Roon-Ready streamer includes a superb MQA-compatible DAC along with nine digital and analog inputs with source switching and a volume control, obviating the need for a separate preamplifier. Just connect to a network and run the analog outputs (balanced or unbalanced) to your power amplifier. There are even HDMI inputs with Audio Return Channel (ARC) for using the P1 in a multimedia system. Lumin has overcome the main drawback of a digital preamplifier—a digital volume control—by including sophisticated Leedh processing that adjusts the volume with no loss of resolution. If you want music storage, simply add Lumin's L1 external HDD (2TB or 5TB), which is extremely easy to configure. Best of all, the P1's sound quality is superb, and commensurate with standalone bare-bones $10k DACs. The P1's most salient quality is a smooth and liquid rendering of timbre that makes for relaxed listening. Despite the P1's sense of ease, the unit has outstanding resolution of timbre, transient information, and spatial cues. Surprisingly, the P1 sounds better when controlled by its dedicated Lumin app than with Roon. The P1 is a great product and a tremendous bargain. (Reviewed this issue)

## Wadax Reference Server
**$59,000 ($76,495 with Akasa optical interface)**

This crazy-expensive server must be mated to Wadax's equally crazy-expensive ($225,000) Reference DAC to realize both products' performance potentials. That's because the custom, proprietary Akasa optical interface between the two elevates their already state-of-the-art performance to an entirely new realm. But if you have the dough and the significant rack space, there is no better sounding digital front end, in my experience. The Server and its optical interface took the system to the next level of timbral realism, soundstaging, resolution, and bass performance. The Wadax pair overcomes so many of digital's shortcomings, particularly in its ability to create a palpable sense of three dimensionality, in liquidity of timbre, and in clarity of instrumental line. The Server's bass is revelatory, resolving pitch, dynamics, and texture in acoustic and electric bass convincingly. Moreover, unique front-panel controls allow you to fine-tune the Server to your system without changing the data. The Server reveals, for the first time, the potential of digital files in that it makes those files, streamed or stored on the integral 2TB drive, high-res or Red Book, sound like remastered versions. (326)

## Magico M9 Loudspeaker
**$750,000**

This new flagship from Magico breaks fresh ground in loudspeaker design and performance. The M9 is a four-way, six-driver dynamic speaker in a sealed enclosure measuring 80" tall. The drive complement consists of dual 15" woofers, dual 11" mid/bass drivers, a 6" midrange, and a 1.1" tweeter. The 120Hz crossover transition between the 15" woofers and the rest of the speaker is performed at line level in an outboard analog two-way active crossover. This means the M9 must be driven by four amplifier channels. The M9 is astonishing in the way it completely disappears—in several aspects—as a sound source. First, it is tonally colorless in that it has no characteristic sound of its own. As a result, timbres are incredibly realistic—rich and dense in texture and completely free from any artificial patina. Second, the M9 disappears spatially, throwing a huge, continuous, and three-dimensional soundstage completely untethered to the speakers. But perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the M9 is the way it can effortlessly portray the most bombastic orchestral music with the power and impact of the huge speaker that it is, as well as the nuances and expression of small-scale music with the delicacy of a two-way mini-monitor. A landmark achievement. (Reviewed this issue)

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**Robert Harley**

## AudioQuest Dragon Interconnects
**$11,900, 1m balanced**

Although AudioQuest has been developing proprietary cable materials and techniques for 42 years, the company embarked on the new "Mythical Creatures" series of interconnects with a fresh mind. Rather than create a more advanced implementation of its existing technologies, AudioQuest approached its new reference series by starting from first principles. It would call on proven technologies but not be bound by them. The result is a fascinating amalgam of fresh thinking and AudioQuest's proven designs.

Dragon does everything you'd expect from a top-level interconnect at this price, but it also goes above and beyond the cliches of greater transparency, smoother textures, and a bigger soundstage. Judged simply by the traditional criteria for evaluating cables, Dragon excelled in all the audiophile parameters. But this interconnect did things I've never heard from a cable—or more precisely, Dragon allowed my system to reveal previously hidden qualities. For example, the midrange was simply luscious, liquid, and stunningly present and vivid. Vocals were completely untethered to the speakers and projected against an absolutely silent background. This had the effect of increasing the sense of presence and fostering the startling impression of the vocalist being in the room. Another aspect of Dragon that is unique is that it conveys a greater density of timbre and more richly saturated tone color. I felt that the sound, from the lowest bass to the top treble, simply had greater body and weight. Instruments not only had more dimensionality and color, but also the sense that there was more energy behind them. The most significant advance in interconnects I've encountered in 33 years of reviewing. (Forthcoming)

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## Jacob Heilbrunn

### J.Sikora Standard Max Turntable
**$21,000**

The J.Sikora 'table immediately goes to the head of the class. Its fit 'n' finish can only be termed exemplary; the sound it produces, captivating. The Sikora, which accepts up to two tonearms and employs two motors and rubber belts, is impressive when it comes to speed stability, creating a deep and wide soundstage allied with excellent pitch accuracy. A more expensive reference power supply ($4625) kicks overall performance up another notch. Throughout, the Standard Max displays an enviable certitude in navigating treacherously dynamic vinyl passages that makes for hours of blissful reproduction, whether the genre is rock or classical or jazz. Perhaps its most notable feature is that like far more expensive 'tables, the Max produces the jet-black backgrounds that were once thought to be the sole province of digital recordings. Not so. With the Sikora, many of the irritants that were once part and parcel of listening to LPs are simply relegated to yesteryear, at a price tag that until recently would have been considered inconceivable. Anyone searching for a 'table that will deliver the musical goods with panache and power, solidity, and punch, need look no further. (324)

### darTZeel NHB-468 Monoblock Amplifier
**$235,000/pr.**

These glamorous, gold-and-crimson Swiss amplifiers offer a level of performance that is truly bedazzling. One moment they are belting out an orchestral or piano crescendo with absolute authority, the next they are plunging into a quiet abyss of sound with impressive control and transparency. With up to 2000 watts on tap, the darTZeel is a powerhouse of an amp that effortlessly traverses the summits of musical reproduction. For one thing, the amp is a real toe-tapper. It commands an alacrity and dynamic liveliness that few, if any, of its brethren possess, allowing it to reproduce transients with an explosive power that is pretty darn close to the real thing. Add in a tonal accuracy throughout the frequency spectrum that ensures the proper weight in the bass region and endows the treble with a delightful mellifluity, banishing any lingering sense of electronic artifacts that can render prolonged listening a chore, particularly on digital recordings. Throughout, it simply seems imperturbable, no matter the musical demands. When matched with the elegant custom stands crafted by Thixar's CEO Dirk Ruedell, the results are heavenly, indeed. Oh, the places you'll go! The bottom line: In designing these magnificent amplifiers, Herve Deletraz has outdone himself. (327)

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### Wilson Audio LōKē Subwoofer
**$8750**

There is, as the saying goes, no replacement for displacement. If your system goes low, you get the bottom octaves. But if it goes lower, you get the venue itself. Reaching those lowly depths, however, requires a subwoofer or two. Enter LōKē. LōKē, you could say, is not low key. Instead, it delivers the final frontier of space. This sonorous sub features a built-in 500-watt amplifier, crossover controls on the rear, and a 10" woofer. It moves quite a bit of air, displaying remarkably precise pitch definition in the nether regions. LōKē can crank it out on bombastic pop and rock numbers. But it has a number of salubrious effects when it comes to less frenetic music, as well. The truth is that, in evening out the bass frequencies, it helps provide a smoother treble and richer midrange. Vocals sound fuller and brass more refulgent. Unlike the mighty Thor's evil brother Loki, LōKē is always well behaved and helpful, at least when it comes to the spheres of musical reproduction. Daryl Wilson, who has succeeded to the helm of Wilson Audio, keeps producing winners and the LōKē, friends, is no exception. (Forthcoming)

## LSX II – The Definitive Compact Wireless HiFi

Welcome to a world of High-Fidelity sound that is true enough to touch. Designed by Michael Young in collaboration with KEF, the all-in-one speaker system LSX II is upgraded with the W2 wireless platform and enhanced DSP algorithm in the Music Integrity Engine to deliver a more balanced sound while updating usability with the KEF Connect App for ease of use. Play anything with all-inclusive connectivity.

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## Ortofon Verismo Cartridge
**$6999**

Sitting squarely in the empty spot between the Windfeld Ti and the top-line MC Diamond cartridge in Ortofon's Exclusive Series, the company's newest offering, the Verismo, fills the gap comfortably. Using Ortofon's Selective Layer Melting (SLM) process, the Verismo's body is made (layer by layer) of titanium to form a dense and rigid structure with high internal damping. Equipped with Ortofon's Replicant 100 stylus, Aucurum coils, low-magnetic armature, and field stabilizing element, the Verismo has the added advantage of an upgraded Wide-Range-Damping (WRD) system. (WRD consists of a platinum disc sandwiched between two dissimilar rubber/multiwall-carbon-nanotube absorbers.) The Verismo has also inherited the diamond cantilever formerly only available on its flagship MC cartridge. With the new rubber formulation, WRD provides optimal damping and improved tracking abilities. As a result, the new Verismo tracks and traces grooves effortlessly, while providing an exceptional amount of perceived realism. The Verismo offers up the most truthful evenhandedness and musical transparency that I can recall from this manufacturer, surpassing my previous most-preferred Ortofon, the MC A95. The new rubber compound and diamond cantilever have taken the Verismo to new heights. (Forthcoming)

**Andre Jennings**

## Excel Sound Corporation Hana SL Cartridge
**$750**

Around five years ago, I said that the Hana SL establishes a baseline of performance that any cartridge demanding a higher price should exceed, without any steps backwards in other areas. This seems like it should be a simple matter, but the Hana SL makes it a tall order for some higher-priced cartridges, especially the part about not stepping backwards. At that time, I also reported that the Hana SL had an even-handed response across the frequency spectrum, traces the grooves very well (from low-to-high frequencies), and has a touch of color that moves it ever so slightly to the warm side of neutral. Today, the Hana SL continues to impress in system configurations that include higher-cost analog front ends. At its price point, it is still a standout. This cartridge will allow the owner to enjoy his vinyl playback system while providing an anchor for future upgrades of tonearms, turntables, and phonostages. For a cartridge at any price, the Hana SL holds its own against the competition, and then some. Over the years, it has been an easy recommendation, offering low distortion, high coherence, excellent soundstage depth and width, and an uncanny sense of togetherness. It's still a keeper. (270)

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## Drew Kalbach

### KEF LSX Wireless Powered Loudspeaker
**$1249**

It's been three years going since I first came across the KEF LSX, and I have the pleasure of saying that I am still using a pair and loving them. The LSXes are compact, wireless, attractive, and boast enormous sound that won't require endless tweaking. They're powered by a 70W Class D amp for the mid and bass driver, and a 30W amp for the tweeter. The inputs are simple: Bluetooth, Wi-Fi streaming, optical, and 3.5mm analog. There's also a sub-out for an extra hit of bass, an Ethernet port for wired Internet, and a USB port that can be used for Chromecast Audio. On the desktop, they're fantastic as a set of nearfield speakers hooked up to a computer. In a traditional hi-fi setup, they'll impress with their big, bold sound. While their bass won't blow out eardrums, there's definitely a palpable slam. The LSXes are insanely flexible and could be slotted in anywhere with a convenient wall socket. They're truly wireless, which means they don't need a tether to connect with each other, though a wired connection is necessary to reach the highest possible digital-playback resolution. Setup is about as brainless as it gets, and the app allows for customization. Of all the pieces of gear I've reviewed, the LSX remains one of my very favorites. (294; LSX II forthcoming)

### Polk L600 Loudspeaker
**$1749**

The Polk L600 is an affordable, gorgeous, imposing loudspeaker. It is heavy at over 70 pounds, beautifully designed, and wonderfully finished with woodgrain sides and a smooth baffle. Its impedance is 4 ohms with 86dB sensitivity, meaning it'll need a bit more power to truly sing, so keep that in mind when building a system. But once a pair of these beauties is situated, aligned to the room, and given enough juice, you'll get what you paid for. The sound is deep and tight, with a fantastic low end that rumbles and kicks with amazing speed. The midrange is smooth and pleasant, and the high end has a nice sparkle thanks to the Pinnacle ring tweeter. It's the realistic bass that makes the L600 stand out: kick drums have remarkable weight and impact without becoming muddled, perhaps due to Polk's enhanced Power Port. I found myself flipping through genres with pleasure. Jazz, rock, electronic, whatever I threw at it, the Polk L600 delivered an engaging and exciting experience. The L600 needs to be on the radar of any budget-conscious audiophile looking for a pair of speakers with solid heft and surprising musicality. (324)

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## Dominio Digitale

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### Bluesound Powernode Gen 3 Streaming DAC and Integrated Amplifier
**$949**

The Bluesound Powernode Gen 3 is an all-in-one stereo (or multi-room) system for modern times, incorporating wired and wireless streaming, DAC, analog inputs, and power amp, with full control from the BluOS app, which can be run on (almost) any computing or mobile platform. It includes everything you might need except for phono preamplifier, speaker cables, or speakers, in a compact and unobtrusive chassis. The real story here is the surprisingly good sound for the price. The Powernode Gen 3 easily fits into systems that include other components (even cables) that cost as much or more than the Bluesound unit itself without embarrassing itself sonically. Slightly on the mellow and forgiving side of neutral, it should pair well with a wide variety of speakers and rooms; yet it still provides plenty of detail and microdynamics for a surprising amount of satisfaction from all genres of music. Also surprising is the amount of power available—130W (8 ohms) and 220W (4 ohms) of IHF dynamic power for musical peaks. (Forthcoming)

### Cambridge Audio CXN V2 Network Player
**$1299**

In my initial review, I was impressed by the CXN V2 network player but thought it a bit bright. Now, after adjusting cables, feeding it from a fiber-optic Ethernet link via Sonore's optical- Module, and listening to it for months with many different speakers, I judge it genuinely accurate and very revealing. I have not heard a wide variety of recent DACs, but I have heard some, including several that are more expensive. The CXN V2 brings music to life in a way that is exciting and engaging. It provides plenty of detail, impressive micro- and macro-dynamics, a wide and deep soundstage, and very analog-like smooth and rich timbres, particularly on high-res tracks. It has no MQA decoding, yet MQA tracks sound wonderful on it as well (noticeably higher resolution than 16/44). Thanks to the superior sound of albums—high-res, MQA, and remastered—streamed through this attainable wonder, my CD collection is now just a backup (though you can play CDs through it, too). The free Cambridge StreamMagic app works quite well for browsing music and has been improved. A great-sounding and functional streamer/DAC at an affordable price, the CXN V2 has proven to be distinctly superior to less expensive options—and a good competitor with similarly priced units. (311)

### Paradigm Founder 80F Loudspeaker
**$3700**

These are really very special speakers, offering a wide array of sonic strengths—detail, dynamics, coherence, realism, imaging, agility—at an affordable price. They aspire to compete sonically with speakers at twice the price. (I listened to well-regarded competitors at $6000 and $5000/pair, and the Founders won the comparison.) Incorporating multiple driver-diaphragm materials, special cabinet design, and vibration-isolation mounting and feet advancements, these are some of the most sophisticated speakers Paradigm has ever made. Extension at the frequency extremes, evenness of response, good driver integration, time alignment, nearly inert cabinets, low overhang and ringing, all contribute to low-coloration sound. Their ability to make individual instruments or singers pop out of the mix in front of you with startling immediacy and precise location always brings a smile; it's almost as if you had paid for a private concert. Their high sensitivity, moderate impedance, controlled dispersion, and bottom port all mean they can be used with a wide variety of amps (including low-powered ones) and listening rooms. They are very honest and revealing; increases in fidelity from remastering, high-resolution files, and improvements in source components, amplification, and cables will all be easily heard (and enjoyed); and they are attractive, with refined and elegant cosmetics that should be domestically appealing for most. (324)

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**Muse Kastanovich**

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P-580
C-580
P-580
C-580

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Aavik

HANDCRAFTED IN DENMARK

## Kirk Midtskog

### YG Sonja 2.2i Loudspeaker
**$88,300 with DC2 crossover; $11,500, DC2 separate**

I gave the original Sonja 2.2 a Golden Ear Award in 2018, and the current 2.2i merits a GEA this year. The "i" in the model's name indicates that YG's unique Dual Coherent crossover, which optimizes both relative phase and frequency response, has been upgraded to Dual Coherent 2 technology. The original DC crossover favored the frequency and phase alignment in the overlap between the tweeter and mid/woofers and allowed a wider phase tolerance in the overlap between the mid/woofers and the bass driver. The new DC2 crossover brings both the upper and lower overlap zones (1.75kHz and 65Hz) to within ±5 degrees of each other in phase. Importantly, frequency response remains ±1dB in the audible band *per* YG. Even though the high-pass section of the mid/woofers' bandpass filter's phase alignment is the principal change, the overall sonic performance advancement is greater than that change alone would suggest. The entire presentation becomes more transparent, more intelligible, more immediate, more present...more alive. There is also no attendant downside, such as any sort of spotlighting or exaggeration from top to bottom. Imaging and soundstaging became more holographic and believable as a rendering of actual music-making in a physical space. The Sonja 2.2i is a wonderfully musical, accurate, and coherent full-range floorstander. (279/327)

### Shunyata Research Everest 8000 Power Distributor
**$8995**

I have had the pleasure of using the Everest 8000 power conditioner—I mean, power *distributor*, as Shunyata calls it—for about a year, and the more I've used it the more it has impressed me. When paired with Shunyata's Omega XC power cord ($7000), which is pretty much how most people deploy the Everest, my system makes music sound both more dynamically alive and more at ease. Because the noise floor is lowered so dramatically, greater contrasts in dynamic and timbral shadings allow for a more complete rendering of recordings. Imaging and soundstaging are also more three-dimensional and lifelike. Unlike many power conditioners that can inhibit power delivery, the Everest has a patented power-reservoir technology (called QR/BB) that delivers extra power on demand. Shunyata deploys several other unique technologies, but limited space does not allow for a complete accounting. Build-quality is first rate, and the form factor (an elongated truncated-pyramid shape), equipped with "cradles" to support the cable plugs, makes it easy to use. I believe other reviewers have also given the Everest 8000 awards, including a Golden Ear Award by Robert Harley in 2020. It is so good that I must join the chorus of those who have already praised it. An easy GEA this year, too. (311)

### Raidho TD 2.2 Loudspeaker
**$46,500 in black, $51,000 in walnut**

I reviewed the model just below the TD2.2, the stand-mounted TD1.2, in 2020 and gave it a GEA that year. The floorstanding 2.5-way TD2.2 maintains many of the smaller model's considerable performance strengths and adds larger-than-expected doses of bass extension, dynamic range, and soundstage height to the mix. Carried over from the TD1.2 is Raidho's characteristic pristine refinement in the midrange and upper frequencies. Raidho uses its own excellent drivers, in this case a quasi-ribbon tweeter and two 6.5" aluminum mid/woofer cones coated with five layers of tantalum and industrial diamond (hence the TD in the series' name). The TD2.2 has excellent retrieval of fine detail (without any harshness or grit), which draws the listener into the world of the music at an intellectual and emotional level. The TD2.2's overall sound is supported by robust, satisfying bass (another Raidho characteristic), so don't be surprised by higher bass output than you might expect from just two 6.5" mid/woofers in a modestly sized cabinet. Included in the TD2.2 listening experience are precise tactile imaging and expansive 3-D soundstaging, making listening sessions rewarding, indeed. Music shines so vividly when played back through the TD2.2 that it deserves a highly polished Golden Ear award. (Forthcoming)

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## Dick Olsher

### Rogers LS3/5A Classic 15-ohm Special Edition Loudspeaker

**$4895**

In hindsight, it is easy to acknowledge that this BBC-spec mini-monitor is, in fact, one of the most influential loudspeakers of all time, having inspired a host of imitators since its inception in the late 1970s. In view of its cult status, I'm certain that most hard-core audiophiles have had a chance to audition a pair over the years. My close encounters with the LS3/5A began in the 1980s, and although I was enamored with its spectacular imaging and natural midrange, its limited dynamics were cause enough for us to part company. Fast forward a few decades, and meet up with Rogers Hi-Fi's Andy Whittle, who started experimenting with Panzerholz, a German high-tech, resin-loaded wood product that is compressed to half of its original dimensions. It is much denser and acoustically inert than ordinary wood. His goal was to improve the LS3/5A's jump factor. Toward that end, he replaced the thin front baffle with Panzerholz, which is now standard in the Special Edition, together with upgraded drivers and crossover resistors. After auditioning this version, I'm convinced that it represents a major increase in performance. Nothing has been lost in spatial conviction or image focus, but midrange transparency has increased. *Über alles* is the sensation of compelling emotional tonality that consistently draws you into the musical performance, with enough detail and micro-dynamic conviction to satisfy even an old hand like me. Quite a surprising feat from what is nominally a 5" mid/bass driver.

Being a sealed-box design makes for a significant improvement in bass-line definition over a bass-reflex box. The bass rolls off gently at 12dB per octave below 80Hz. True, there isn't much deep bass, but the midbass is plenty satisfying. I had almost forgotten how much more natural sealed-box bass could sound relative to bass reflex. One thing is certain, unlike so many stand-mounted mini-monitors that manage to sound anemic through the upper-bass range, the Rogers manages to generate sufficient tonal weight to do justice to piano tonality.

The Classic is a true 15-ohm nominal load with a benign 12-ohm impedance minimum. Not only is this an easy load for a tube amp, but the impedance magnitude is fairly flat from 1.5kHz to 20kHz, thereby minimizing tube-amp load interactions and ensuring tonal accuracy through the upper mids and treble. I cycled through a few of the tube amps in my collection, including the Berning EA-230, JWN 807, and Will Vincent Dynaco ST-70, and discovered that the Rogers is exceptionally revealing of an amplifier's intrinsic sonic character. It is also a match made in heaven for any Futterman-style OTL. In particular, my refurbished Futterman H3 OTL purred like a fat cat on a hot tin roof. This coupling with its honey-sweet midrange textures exemplified soothing and luxurious sound at its best.

The tonal balance changes with the grilles off, being more forward. This is confirmed by measurements which show increased output in the presence and lower-treble regions (4kHz and 9kHz). With the grilles on, the balance is more mellow and perceptually sweeter through the midband. In either case, the frequency response shows that notorious peak (+3dB) at about 1.2kHz that has been observed in the past. With the grilles on, I could not detect the peak as a coloration, but with them off it was audible as a slight case of nasality. The moral of the story is to be sure and leave the grilles on. And in case you're wondering, the matching Panzerholz stands do improve performance and are a recommended coupling ($1995).

The LS3/5A has weaved quite a spell over me. It has simply made it difficult to stop listening to the music, and that is a high complement, indeed. The legend lives on! (Forthcoming)

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> — Anthony Cordesman, *The Absolute Sound*, Issue 317

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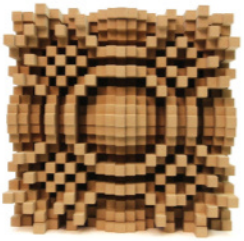
## Totem Acoustic Element Fire V2 Loudspeaker
**$7500/pair**

For a modest-sized monitor that plays much bigger than it looks, it's hard to do better than the second generation of Totem Acoustic's Element Fire stand-mount. Though the enclosure measures only 8.8" x 16.6" x 11.7", the Fire's given LF specification is a quite believable 30Hz. Plus, the speaker packs considerable dynamic punch. This may relate to the robust 7" Torrent driver in this 2-way ported design. The woofer's motor structure is machined from a single piece of aluminum alloy with the finished device weighing in at close to 10 pounds—Totem proudly notes a 17Hz free-air resonance with the potential for a 1" cone excursion. The tweeter is a 1" titanium dome. The two drivers are coupled via a simple first-order high-pass filter. No low-pass filter is required, and the Torrent woofer operates full-range. With rock and pop recordings played at enthusiastic levels, with symphonic music, and even with pipe organ spectaculars, the diminutive Fires will satisfy most over the long haul, though the judicious integration of a good subwoofer can further increase the enjoyment of these genres. The Fire V2s deliver the goods expected from a smaller loudspeaker—detail, spatial expansiveness, and tonal accuracy. A real overachiever. (Reviewed this issue)

**Andrew Quint**



## GIK Acoustics Gotham N23 5" Quadratic Diffusers
**$399 for two**

A listening room is not a concert hall, and some attention to the acoustics of the space—the fraught subject of "room treatment"—is often required to maximize the positive attributes of an audio system. To be sure, sidewall reflections and a room's bass nodes must be prioritized, but the introduction of well-executed diffusion can greatly increase the perceived size of a domestic listening space. Diffusers will take potentially damaging reflections and break them down into groups of smaller reflections that are then redistributed back into the room without alteration of their timing or amplitude. A "quadratic diffusor" has a series of troughs the dimensions of which have been calculated according to "quantum wavelength theory." The device reflects the incident soundwaves back into the room in a consistent and predictable fashion. Despite what you may have heard, randomly pulling out books, LPs, or CDs from the shelving behind your speakers will not accomplish the same thing. Installing two or more of GIK's surprisingly affordable 17.5" x 17.5" quadratic diffusor panels has the potential to improve soundstage depth, perceived detail, and spaciousness, in general. They are an exceptionally cost-effective upgrade to most systems, and they aren't unattractive as things audio go. (Not reviewed)

## Tidal Audio Ferios Monoblock Power Amplifiers
**$85,000/pair**

The Holy Grail of amplifier design is to build one that furnishes ample power without muscularity becoming the product's defining attribute, without tonal neutrality, natural detail, and that hard-to-define metric known as musicality taking a back seat. Tidal's Ferios monoblocks provide 300 watts of continuous RMS power into an 8-ohm load, 580 watts into 4 ohms, and more than 700 into 2 ohms—enough to assure authoritative control of any consumer loudspeaker played in a real world domestic environment. Each amplifier has two regulated 800VA power supplies and a whopping 410,000µF of capacitance. The Ferios features a DC-coupled input circuit, without capacitors or relays in the music's pathway from start to finish. Likewise, a proprietary protection system does its surveillance without touching the signal. The result is an utterly effortless and transparent magnification of the fragile electrical impulse presented to the amplifier, whether the power required is two watts or two hundred. This makes for an exceptionally relaxed presentation that allows a listener to devote his psychic energy to making an emotional connection to music. Yes, the price of admission is high, but if it is within your means, you'll never look back. (Forthcoming)

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## Paul Seydor

### Denon DL-103, DL-103R, and DLA220GS Phono Cartridges
**$349, $499, $599**

These are three different versions of the same pickup. The DL-103 enjoys a longer life without modification than any other phono cartridge in the history of audio, while also being one of the most beloved audio products ever made. The base model DL-103 is exactly the same pickup, manufactured exactly the same way (by hand) since its introduction in 1962. Five paramount virtues account for its staying power: a natural, supremely musical tonal profile; the ability to make recordings come dynamically, vibrantly, intoxicatingly *alive*; body, dimensionality, and solidity resulting in outstanding resolution of the sometimes-conflicting demands of soundstaging and imaging; an impression of connectedness resulting in a gripping sense of flow and drive; and a sample-to sample-consistency and reliability that should be the envy of the industry. These pickups are now among my top references. Only snobs will fret over the bargain pricing, while the rest of us are rewarded with the peerless satisfaction provided discriminating music lovers by this magnificent design for over six decades now. (328)

### Graham Audio LS8/1 Loudspeaker
**$9700 (stands included)**

My colleague Robert E. Greene, who has had long experience with the classic BC-1 loudspeaker designed by Spencer Hughes, reviewed the new LS8/1, possibly the last upgrading of that venerable design, carried out by Spencer's son Derek. The importer allowed me to audition the review pair for about three weeks before they went over to REG's. Because I knew my time with them was limited, I listened as much as I could. While I lack REG's familiarity with the original, I did own son Derek's first go at upgrading his father's design in the nineties, the Spendor SP1/2, one of the most timbrally truthful loudspeakers I've ever heard. The 8/1 is even better in that regard. I cannot improve upon REG's review, so I will mention two aspects of the original design that gave many people trouble: considerably less than stellar bass response (to put it mildly) and somewhat limited dynamic range. As I hear it, there is no basis for any reservations along these lines in the LS8/1, except in very large rooms. If I were absolutely forced to choose one loudspeaker for the rest of my life, the LS8/1 would be on the short list. (323)

### Graham Audio 5/5 Monitor Loudspeaker
**$20,000/pair**

A three-way design with slot-loading of the midrange and woofer to achieve a wider, smoother, more uniform axial response, the 5/5 manages the difficult trick of achieving a uniform frequency response across an approximately 60-degree window, while at the same time realizing state-of-the-art imaging and a commandingly impressive dynamic range that will exceed the requirements of most music listeners in anything short of baronial-sized listening rooms. Bass response is deep enough to obviate the need for a subwoofer unless pipe organs constitute a steady diet, while the overall tonal balance is such that day after day on recording after recording over several months the 5/5 left me with the feeling that I was hearing back to the original source in a way that I've experienced with very few speakers. The 5/5 is designed to be a professional monitor of very high neutrality; despite its employing multiple drivers, at no time during the long evaluation period did I ever feel I was listening to different drivers, different materials, different colorations. So carefully has Hughes chosen the drivers and so scrupulously has he matched and optimized them through size, crossover, slotting, and other engineering solutions, not least very careful listening, to work as an integrated system, that the LS5/5 always appeared to speak with a single voice from top to bottom with quite amazing transparency and outstanding coherence. To repeat what I said of the 8/1: If I absolutely had to choose one speaker to live with the rest of my life, the 5/5 would be on the short list, albeit higher up. What I can say for now is that I consider it the finest three-way cone-based loudspeaker in my experience and one of the finest, period. (Forthcoming)

## Meze Elite Headphone
**$4000**

Meze headphones hail from Romania. Its products are the result of a unique design collaboration between Meze and Rinaro Isodynamics. During the last 30 years, Rinaro has focused all its design efforts on perfecting planar-magnetic transducers. The Rinaro Parus planar diaphragm achieves an extremely low mass by utilizing an ultra-thin, biaxially oriented, semi-crystalline film. This film is produced through a special process that involves stretching it in transverse directions at high temperatures. Instead of one unified voice coil the Elite uses a dual-driver system. The switchback coil, located in the upper section of the planar diaphragm, is more efficient on lower frequencies. While the spiral coil, located in the lower section, is more efficient on middle and upper frequencies. Meze has also developed a unique headband design that originated on its Empyrean headphones to increase the Elite's wearability. Instead of the standard U-shaped curve to the leather lower part of the headband, the Elite's is almost W-shaped, which spreads the headphones weight over a larger portion of your head, making them more comfortable. The Elite is an open-back design whose sonic attributes reflect that. It produces a huge soundstage that is comparable to other reference headphones with a similar backless design, such as the Warwick Sonoma system. The Meze Elite is, in every way, a reference-quality headphone that earns its flagship status and justifies its price. The Meze Elite is the kind of headphone that quickly and conclusively elevates listening to the point that after some time spent with it, it's hard to go back to headphones that are merely extremely good. (Forthcoming)

## Topping D90SE DAC
**$899**

Topping has emerged from China as one of their most technically advanced and internationally competitive audio firms. Topping's most expensive DAC, the D90ES ($899), ranks as having some of the best digital performance specifications of any DAC, regardless of price or technology. The D90SE would not exist except for the fact that Topping's previous flagship, the D90MQA, used a top-of-the-line AKM DAC chip. AKM had a catastrophic fire in its factory, which curtailed all its DAC-chip production. Topping had no choice but to redesign its DACs to use ESS DAC chips. While it is indisputably true that the D90SE is a Johnny-come-lately offering from a Chinese manufacturer with a limited track record with audiophiles here in the United States, the Topping D90SE delivers on all its promises. Its goal is to sound like the ultimate, straight, clean, no-added-romance, high-resolution DAC. After extensive listening, I found the D90SE to be exactly what it purported to be—a well-designed digital audio converter that performs on a par with reference DACs I have used in the past. (326)

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**Steven Stone**

## Dan Clark Audio Stealth Headphone
**$3999**

When Dan Clark began his audio firm, he named it Mr. Speakers. In hindsight, this moniker was less than totally appropriate for a firm that made headphones exclusively. Three years ago, Mr. Speakers became Dan Clark Audio. The latest flagship model, the Stealth, incorporates the best features of earlier designs, while adding several new technological twists that propel its performance to current reference level. The Stealth employs Dan Clark's fourth-generation V-planar-magnetic driver, which is 20% larger than its E2 driver. This new driver also promises to deliver superior low-frequency extension, as well as lower total harmonic distortion. The Stealth is a closed-enclosure headphone. Closed headphones must physically damp their back-wave somehow. Dan Clark has developed its own patented methodology, called "Acoustic Metamaterial Tuning System" (AMTS), to cope with that issue. I've used many closed-enclosure headphones, but none have combined style, comfort, sound quality, and isolation as successfully as the Dan Clark Stealth headphones. If you require a full-sized closed headphone that delivers a superb listening experience, the Stealth will get you there. (Forthcoming)

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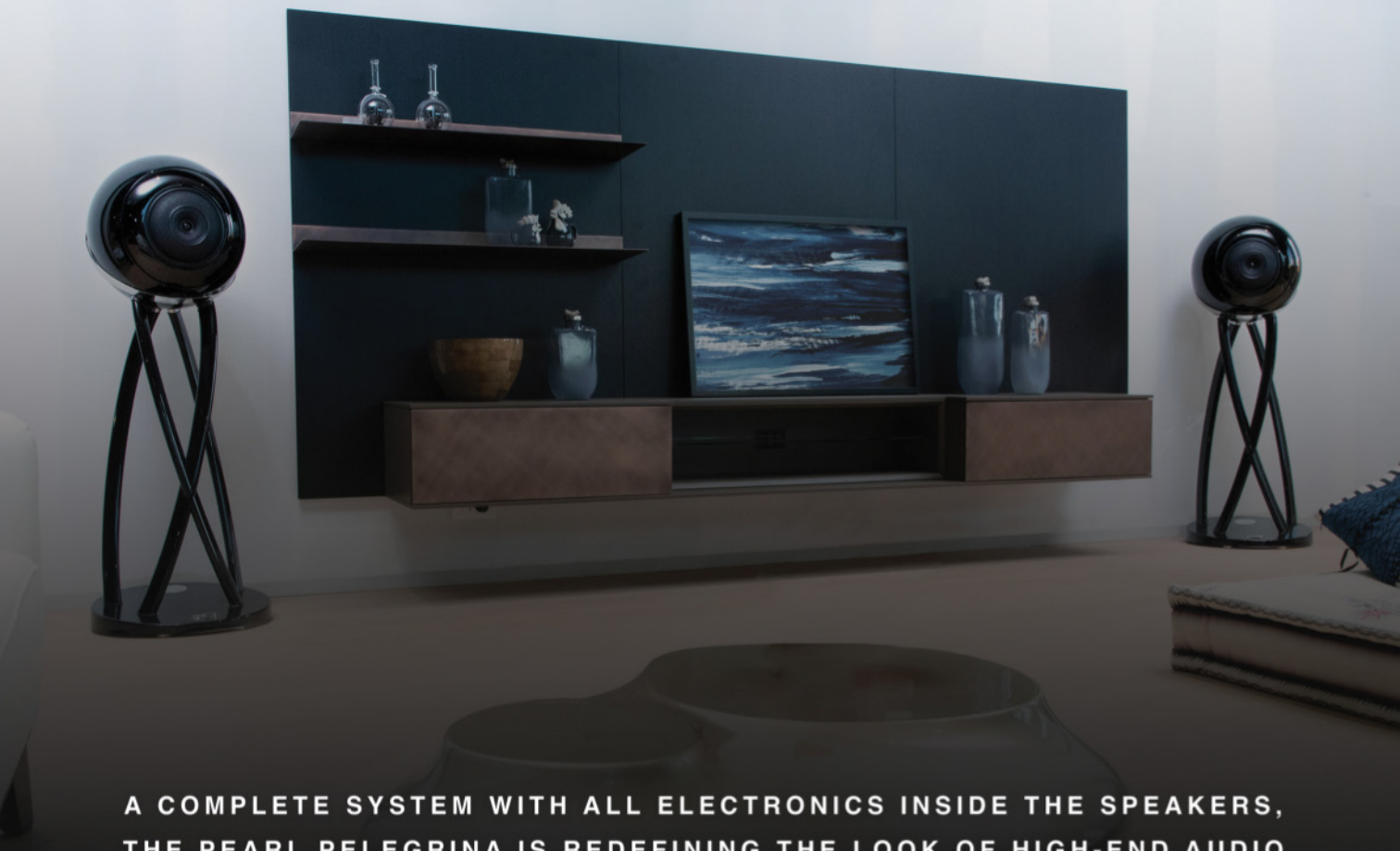

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## Empirical Design Cables
## Prices Vary

Empirical Design is probably the most under-the-radar, over-the-top-performing high-end cable company in existence. It's been my reference for nearly 20 years, along the way winning two previous Golden Ear Awards. But those were back in the aughts. It's worth noting that, through constant incremental evolution, these cables and power cords have retained what originally set them apart: top-notch parts-quality, straightforward topologies, hand-built construction, and a price roughly one-tenth that of cables of comparable merit. Recently, two events reminded of these cables' unique attributes. First, the sonics of a review component were transformed—no exaggeration—by the insertion of a $240 Empirical Design power cord. Second, some fancy-pants speaker cable recommended by the speaker's manufacturer was shown up by the far more neutral ED wire. At prices in the hundreds rather than the thousands, these cables are a no-brainer investment for most systems. (Not reviewed)

**Alan Taffel**

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## T+A 200-Series Electronics
## $4900/$5700/$6900

In my series on "Building a Compact Reference System," I sung the praises of modular, multifunction electronics as a space-saving alternative to separate components. In creating the 200-Series, the folks at German audio powerhouse T+A had the same goal but a different idea about how to achieve it. What if, they thought, we could retain the benefits of separates—individual power supplies, physical isolation between digital and analog elements, the ability to buy only what you need—but conserve space by making those separates smaller? Thus was the petite 200-Series born. The series comprises a multi-format (CD, HDD, streamer) player, a Roon-ready DAC/pre with both digital and analog inputs, and a stereo power amp. Together, the stack runs $17.5k, which isn't cheap but is still a deal for what it is. For instance, I've compared the 200-Series with my more than twice as dear CH Precision integrated amp, the I1, and the result was startling. The T+A stack was nearly indistinguishable from the far-costlier Swiss equivalent. The CH I1 does have a little more dynamic jump and slightly more fleshed-out tonality. But, boy, is it close.

Aside from sonics, the 200-Series components are achingly attractive—in a retro-audio sort of way—and feature myriad thoughtful touches. These include the ability to stick in a thumb drive, a technically correct (and excellent-sounding) BNC SPDIF input, and control connections between the components that allow the threesome to behave more or less as one. If I were searching in this price range for a compact, versatile electronics stack, I would look no further than the T+A 200-Series. (Forthcoming)

## Metronome DSC Streamer/DAC
## $25,000

Twenty-five grand is a steep but by no means unheard of price for a streaming DAC/preamplifier. In the case of the Metronome DSC, you get your money's worth. Not only is the product built to the highest of high-end standards, with an aluminum chassis to reduce RF interference and a generously sized touchscreen interface, its sound is in some ways revolutionary. Thanks in large part to a volume-control technology called Leedh, the DSC is a DAC/pre with a purity and non-digital nature you thought you'd never hear. The DAC and streaming modules are fully up to the quality of the linestage section, too, which makes for incredibly engaging and gratifying listening. Of course, you could use the DSC purely as a DAC, setting its volume control to fixed, and running it into an outboard linestage, but that would bypass its *raison d'être*. Plug this unit directly into a power amp to see what it can really do. (Forthcoming.)

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*"...you won't be able to remain a tweak cynic when you hear this!"*
***Srajan Ebaen 6moons.com***

NEW

### GTO-D3 NCF power distributor
### GTO-D2 NCF power distributor

The Furutech **GTO-D3 NCF & GTO-D2 NCF** distribution blocks are packed with Furutech top-end wiring and componentry and feature Furutech's antistatic, antiresonance, sound revealing NCF material – all without the top-end price.

### Furutech's top-of-the-line α (Alpha) OCC-DUCC bulk power cord – DPS-4.1

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*"..for those who possess some DIY chops, Furutech just might have the power cord for you. All it takes is a little elbow grease, and you'll be rewarded with a cord that performs on a par with some of the top contenders, at a considerable cost savings. Unreservedly recommended."*
Neil Gader - The Absolute Sound

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### HF-A-NCF

8K V2.1 AOC ULTRA HIGH-SPEED HDMI™ CABLE (8K/60p/48Gpbs)
**Featuring NCF antistatic-antiresonance material**
Optic Fiber and α-Conductors Hybrid Cable (Active Type)
1.5m~20m available

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## Stenheim Alumine Five SE Dynamic Loudspeaker
**$72,000**

Just last year I had the pleasure of reviewing one of the best cone loudspeakers I've heard—the $78k, three-way, three-driver Estelon X Diamond Mk II. As luck would have it, I had the exact same experience this year, thanks to the Swiss company Stenheim.

Though also a three-way floorstander, Stenheim's Alumine Five SE is otherwise quite different than Estelon's X Diamond II. For one thing it has a hefty (220-pound!), damped aluminum chassis, where the Estelon's is made of a hefty (190-pound!) slurry of acrylic and marble. For another, the Stenheim's aluminum enclosure is shaped into a conventional rectangular box, unlike the Estelon's fabulous, near-inaudible, hourglass-shaped one. For a third, the Alumine Five SE is modest in size—less than four-feet tall, one-foot wide, and a foot-and-a-quarter deep—where the Estelon is considerably taller, wider, and deeper. For a fourth, the Stenheim uses "old-fashioned" paper- and fabric-cone drivers (two slot-loaded 10" woofers, one 6.5" midrange, and one 1" fabric-dome tweeter), once again unlike Estelon's latter-day ceramic-sandwich and diamond Accutons.

On the surface, the Alumine Five SE looks like a chunky little schoolgirl, but, as I say in my review, it is actually a chunky little stick of dynamite. With a near-horn-like sensitivity of 94dB/1W/1m and a relatively stable 8-ohm impedance, the Alumine Five SE is capable of simply phenomenal dynamics—unexceeded in speed, power, and nuance by any cone speaker that I've reviewed, regardless of size, configuration, or price. When coupled with what may be the most extended, naturally colored, well-defined-in-pitch bass I've heard from a ported loudspeaker (only the Estelon contends), it's explosively "alive"-sounding. From the low end (down to 30Hz) through the mid-treble, it is capable of dynamic swings that go from 0-to-60 in the blink of an eye. It is also simply gorgeous in tonality (just a little on the bottom-up side), minutely detailed, and unusually three-dimensional in imaging. There isn't a thing about this phenomenal loudspeaker I don't like. As was the case with the X Diamond Mk II, it is a standard-setter, only it doesn't require quite as much square footage behind and around it as the larger Estelon does to perform its magic tricks.

If you listen in a smallish-to-medium-sized space and want the whole enchilada—and not just a taste—without compromise in speed, extension, beauty, resolution, and realism, I can't think of another cone loudspeaker that will beat this one out. It not only wins one of my Golden Ear awards for 2022, but it will also certainly be my nominee for TAS' 2022 Loudspeaker of the Year Award—indeed, for Overall Product of the Year. (328)

**Jonathan Valin**

## Metaxas & Sins Tourbillon T-RX Reel-to-Reel Tape Deck
**$36,000**

Unlike just about every other tape deck currently sold, Kostas Metaxas' re-do of the great Stellavox SP-8 is not a refurbished unit from the Golden Age of tape recording. It is a brand-new deck in a drop-dead gorgeous aluminum chassis that uses the best possible parts in circuits designed, updated, and configured (with Stellavox's Georges Quellet's blessings, BTW) by Kostas Metaxas on the basis of his nearly 40 years of recording experience with the SP-7/8. Like the original, the T-RX is a portable unit, easily moved (in its dedicated carrying case) from your room to a recording venue or to a fellow audiophile's digs. But unlike the Stellavox SP-8, the Metaxas Tourbillon T-RX does not require adaptors to play ten-inch reels. It'll do that—at 7½, 15, or 30ips—entirely on its own.

Over and above its astonishingly "cool" looks, the Tourbillon T-RX is a sonic wonder. I've heard a lot of tape decks over the years—from huge studio Ampexes and Studers to smaller-scale gems made by Nagra, ReVox, Otari, etc. I've also heard just about every iteration of Greg Beron's marvelous United Home Audio Tascams, and (except for Greg's latest, ultra-expensive SuperDeck), not a one of them outdoes the Tourbillon. It is the very quintessence of neutrality and completeness—those twin household audio gods that make ersatz sound like real.

Alongside the UHA SuperDeck, the Metaxas Tourbillon T-RX is the highest fidelity audio component I've auditioned, consistently making the musicians on well-recorded tapes into near-visible presences and music sound as you hear it in life. Like my other Golden Ears, the Metaxas & Sins Tourbillon T-RX will also be a nominee for TAS' annual Product of the Year Awards—and this one would be a Product of the Year in any decade, past or present. (324)

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## Jonathan Valin

### DS Audio DS 003 Optical Phono Cartridge
**$2500 ($6000 with matching equalizer)**

After setting new standards of fidelity in the ultra-high end with his POY-winning $15,000 Grand Master optical cartridge (and $45k, two-box Grand Master equalizer), DS Audio's ingenious Tetsuaki "Aki" Aoyagi has turned his attention to the rest of us. The $2500 DS 003 ($6k with its matching DS 003 equalizer) is a "trickle-down" masterpiece. Using many of the technical innovations first found in the Grand Master (such as a dual-mono optical generator with independent LEDs and photo detectors for each channel and a beryllium "shading plate," which reduces moving mass to 1/10th that of a typical moving-coil cartridge), the "third-generation" 003 sounds almost exactly like a slightly less finely detailed, slightly less spacious Grand Master. Every bit as standard-settingly quiet, explosively dynamic, and robustly rich in color as its big brother, the DS 003 makes opting (or optical'ing) for a new-tech oc a lot easier (and a lot less of a trade-off) than it once was. With channel separation measurably approaching 33dB in the midrange and tracking that is as smooth and glitch-free as that of the far pricier Grand Master, the DS 003 does not compromise soundstaging and trackability in the ways that earlier-gen, "affordable" DS Audios did. If you've longed to sample a top-line oc but haven't had the moolah to do so, now's your chance. The DS 003 opens the door—and opens it wide—to a new world of noise-free, tape-like playback, with bass response and treble sweetness and bloom that you could previously only get with reel-to-reel. Another sure-fire nominee for a 2022 TAS Product of the Year Award. (Reviewed in this issue)

### Aavik P-580 Stereo Power Amplifier
**$30,000**

There is a lot of proprietary technology packed into Michael Børresen's new 300Wpc into 8 ohms (600Wpc into 4 ohms) stereo power amplifier, which is undoubtedly one reason why the P-580 is the first Class D amplifier I can recommend without the usual reservations. Thanks in part to Aavik's unique distortion-reduction circuitry, "resonant-mode" power supply, and high-bandwidth/low-noise UMAC Class D amplifier module (from the Danish pro-audio firm Pascal), the P-580 does not have the usual, digital-like upper-mid/lower-treble glare or brickwall-like top-octave cut-off that Class D amps of the past have evinced. Instead, it is rather soft, sweet, and dark in the brilliance range, like a Class A amp. Of course, it is phenomenal in the bass (all Class D amps have been, due largely to their very high damping factor) and quite appealingly warm, grainless, and grit free in the midband. It is also surprisingly three-dimensional in its imaging. Though not as finely detailed, as 3-D, as richly colored, or as brimming with energy and nuance as my reference power amplifier, the still unsurpassed Soulution 711, the P-580 costs half of what the 711 does, is much smaller in form factor, weighs about 120 pounds less, and runs as cool as a cuke. While the P-580 isn't going to replace Soulution in my system, it is something I could live with pleasurably long-term, which (for me) is a first in a Class D amp and the reason for this year's Golden Ear Award. (Forthcoming)

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## Magnepan LRS+ Quasi-Ribbon Loudspeaker
## $995 ($289, dedicated steel stands)

**Jonathan Valin**

Though I've already raved about the genuinely rave-worthy Stenheim Alumine 5 SE in this year's Golden Ears (and am about to rave, yet again, about the nonpareil MBL 101 X-treme), here we have a truly remarkable planar loudspeaker that costs 70-to-320 times less than my twin references. The original LRS got praised unqualifiedly by just about everyone who reviewed it, except me. Oh, it was and is extremely lifelike in the midrange (as all Maggies are), but the first-gen LRS didn't have much bass and its treble was rough, brightish, and limited in extension, making for a less than robust and seamless top-to-bottom balance. For the money, the LRS was (and is) a very good deal, but to my ear it had "issues." Comes now the updated LRS+ (with its own stout, must-buy, optional aluminum stands), and those things I had reservations about in the original—in the low end and on top—have been ameliorated. From about 60Hz on up, the new LRS+ is a simply phenomenal loudspeaker. You'll notice I didn't say "phenomenal for the money" (though it *is* phenomenal for the money), because the fact is that the LRS+ would be praiseworthy for twice the dough. No, it doesn't have quite the stage height, image size, low-end reach, dynamic range, and uncannily natural tone color of its closest competition in the Maggie line, the superb MG1.7i, but for smallish spaces (even for medium-sized) ones at less-than-thunderous volumes it is gonna be very hard to beat in sheer absolute-sound realism from the midbass up. I don't know what Wendell Diller (who designed it—and everything else from Maggie in recent years) has done differently, but it was certainly for the better. This is another slam-dunk POY nominee, and, IMO, the best buy (along with the MG1.7i) in an affordable loudspeaker for modest-sized rooms. (Forthcoming)


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### MBL 101 X-treme MkII Omnidirectional Loudspeaker

**$325,000**

These truly remarkable omnidirectional loudspeakers have been awarded Golden Ears from me for the past three years (and an Overall Product of the Year Award from TAS in 2019), but since they remain the most realistic-sounding loudspeakers I've ever heard, I'm awarding them another GE in 2022. Comprising two Radialstrahler columns and two outboard, powered subwoofer stacks, the 101 X-tremes are giants. Expensive giants. But until you find a speaker system that sounds more like the real thing (on every kind of music) for less money…well, you're gonna have to settle for second best. As good as drivers-in-a-box speakers have gotten to be (see the Stenheim Alumine 5 SE above), nothing else, dynamic or planar, sounds like these gargantuan Radialstrahlers, because very little else projects its energy, from top to bottom, throughout a true 360 degrees, like instruments themselves do. As a result, the 101 X-tremes simply own the third dimension. And now in this year's MkII version, the X-tremes have been substantially updated (at a substantial rise in price), with new DSP'd subwoofers and other extensive tweaks and improvements. (I will be reviewing the latest versions as soon as they are available.) As I said in my original review of the X-tremes a decade ago, listening to every other transducer is like going to a movie of a concert; listening to the 101 X-tremes is like going to the live event. If you've got the dough (and the space) and are looking for the closest approximation of the real thing, these are the transducers to own. (301) tas


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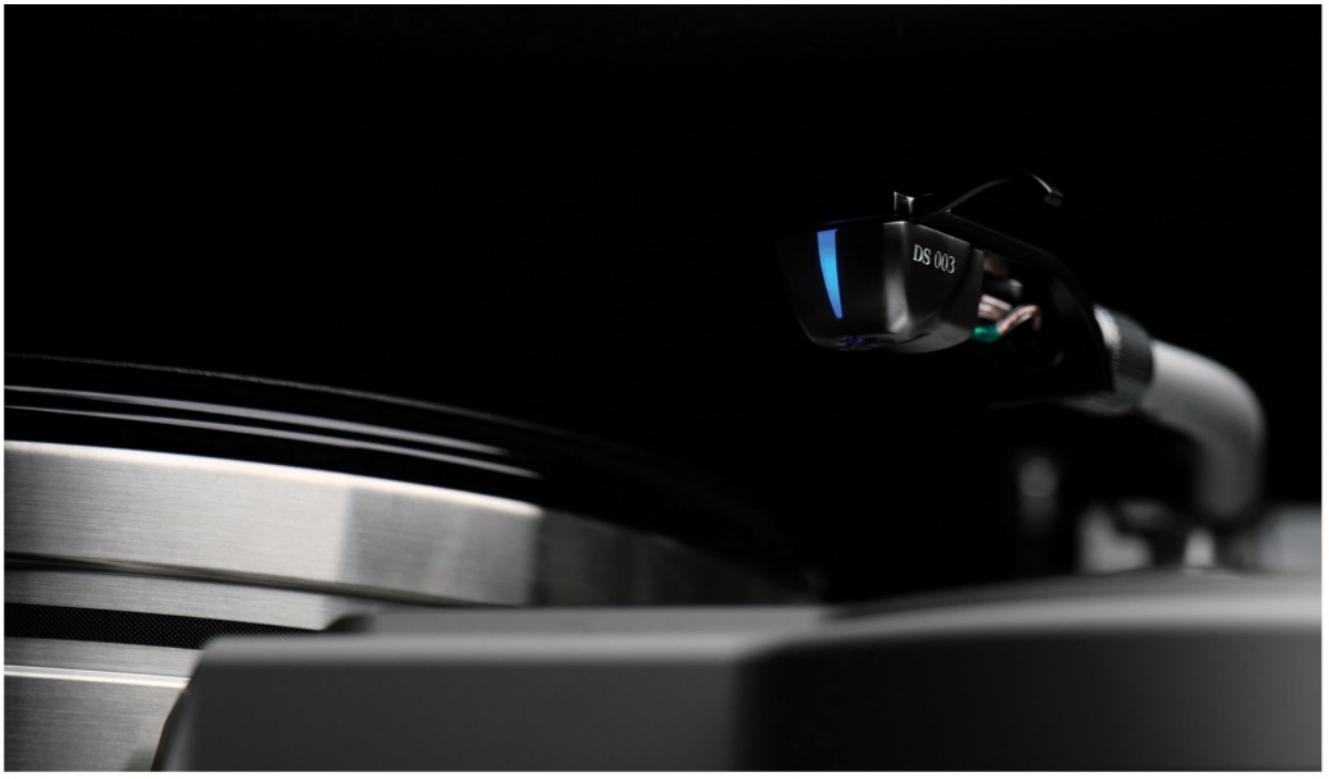


# DS Audio DS 003 Optical Phono Cartridge

## A Grand Master for One-Tenth the Dough

Jonathan Valin

**If you've been following my phono cartridge reviews in** TAS or Ken Kessler's in *HI-Fi News & Record Review*, you already know that DS Audio's optical cartridges (oc's) are the hottest new things in LP playback. Though the theory behind using a massless beam of light rather than comparatively massive coils or magnets to convert the movements of a stylus into electricity is not new (it dates to the 1940s), it took a latter-day technology whiz, Japan's Tetsuaki "Aki" Aoyagi (head of DS Audio), to perfect it.

The optical groove-reading system is fairly easy to explain: The intensity of a light from a miniaturized "lamp" inside the cartridge is continuously modulated by the movement of an extremely low-mass "shading plate" attached to the stylus/cantilever. As the stylus vibrates, the shading plate vibrates in sympathy, blocking varying amounts of the light coming from the lamp. This variable luminosity is then turned into variable voltages by photoreceptors and sent on to a dedicated phonostage unit, where it is equalized and boosted to line level.

Aki's contribution to the perfection of the optical cartridge was based on the development of the computer-era optical mouse at the Digital Stream Corporation (his father's company). By substituting the cool-running, miniaturized LEDs and miniaturized photoreceptors found in optical mice for the hot, tiny, unreliable incandescent bulbs and bulky, low-sensitivity "electric eyes" used in previous-gen optical cartridges, he turned an unreliable twentieth-century curiosity into a wholly reliable twenty-first-century success story.

Over the years, Aki has made improvements to each successive generation of DS Audio oc, culminating (just a year ago) in his *chef d'oeuvre*—the fabulous and fabulously expensive Grand Master cartridge and Grand Master phonostage. What the Grand Master offered (in addition to a diamond cantilever and a micro-ridge diamond stylus) was a fundamental change in the optical "engine" itself (the first such change in DS Audio's relatively brief history). Instead of using a single light source and photoreceptor for both channels, the Grand Master used separate ones for each channel. Coupled with

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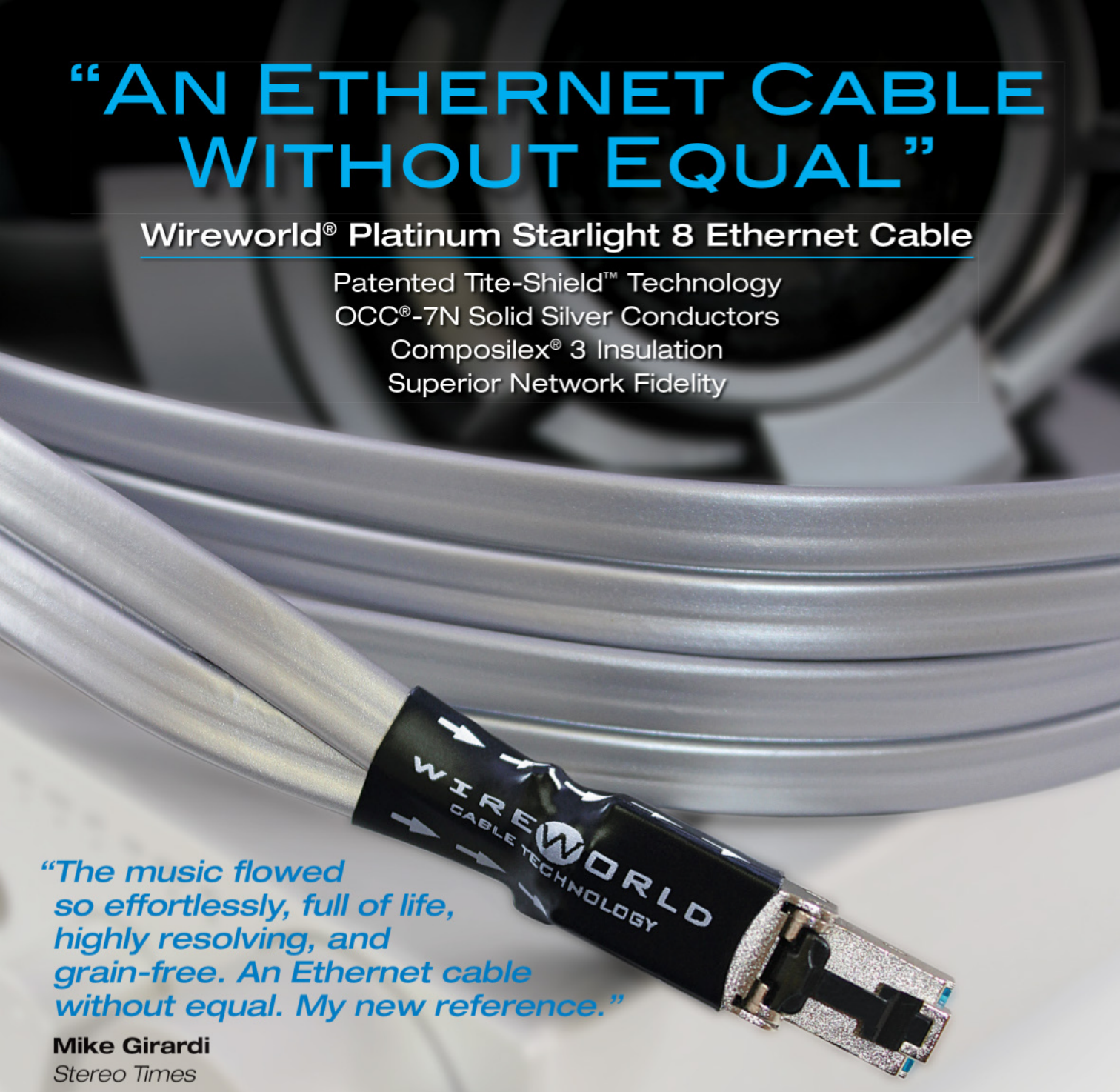


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**DS 003 Optical Cartridge**
**Signal output:** Photo-electric conversion
**Channel separation:** 27dB + (1kHz)
**Weight:** 7.7g
**Output signal level:** 70mV (1kHz)
**Cantilever:** Aluminum
**Stylus:** Line contact
**Body material:** Aluminum (A5052)
**Cantilever holder material:** Stainless
**Tracking force:** 2.0g–2.2g (2.1g recommended)
**Price:** $2500

**DS 003 Phonostage**
**Output voltage**: 500mV (1kHz Equalizer output)
**Output impedance:** RCA 120 ohms
**Preamp input impedance:** > 10k ohms
**Input terminal:** RCA
**Output terminal:** RCA x2
**Dimensions:** 33cm x 9.2cm x 29.5cm
**Weight:** 5.0kg
**Price:** $3500

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**Subwoofers:** JL Audio Gotham (pair)
**Linestage preamps:** Soulution 725, MBL 6010 D, Constellation Audio Altair II, Siltech SAGA System C1, Air Tight ATE-2001 Reference, Zanden 3100
**Phonostage preamps:** Soulution 755, Constellation Audio Perseus, DS Audio Grand Master
**Power amplifiers:** Soulution 711, MBL 9008 A, Aavik P-580, Constellation Audio Hercules II Stereo, Air Tight 3211, Air Tight ATM-2001, Zanden Audio Systems Model 9600, Siltech SAGA System V1/P1, Odyssey Audio Stratos, Voxativ Integrated 805
**Analog source:** Clearaudio Master Innovation, Acoustic Signature Invictus Jr./T-9000, Walker Audio Proscenium Black Diamond Mk V, TW Acustic Black Knight/TW Raven 10.5, AMG Viella 12
**Tape deck:** Metaxas & Sins Tourbillon T-RX, United Home Audio Ultimate 4 OPS
**Phono cartridges:** DS Audio Grandmaster, DS Audio Master1, DS Audio DS 003 Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement, Air Tight Opus 1, Ortofon MC Anna, Ortofon MC A90
**Digital source:** MSB Reference DAC, Soulution 760, Berkeley Alpha DAC 2
**Cable and interconnect:** CrystalConnect Art Series Da Vinci, Crystal Cable Ultimate Dream, Synergistic Research SRX, Ansuz Acoustics Diamond
**Power cords:** CrystalConnect Art Series Da Vinci, Crystal Cable Ultimate Dream, Synergistic Research SRX, Ansuz Acoustics Diamond
**Power conditioner:** AudioQuest Niagara 5000 (two), Synergistic Research Galileo UEF, Ansuz Acoustics DTC, Technical Brain
**Support systems:** Critical Mass Systems MAXXUM and QXK equipment racks and amp stands and CenterStage$^{2M}$ footers
**Room Treatments:** Stein Music H2 Harmonizer system, Synergistic Research UEF Acoustic Panels/Atmosphere XL4/UEF Acoustic Dot system, Synergistic Research ART system, Shakti Hallographs (6), Zanden Acoustic panels, A/V Room Services Metu acoustic panels and traps, ASC Tube Traps
**Accessories**: DS Audio ION-001, SteinMusic Pi Carbon Signature record mat, Symposium Isis and Ultra equipment platforms, Symposium Rollerblocks and Fat Padz, Walker Prologue Reference equipment and amp stands, Walker Valid Points and Resonance Control discs, Clearaudio Double Matrix Professional Sonic record cleaner, Synergistic Research RED Quantum fuses, HiFi-Tuning silver/gold fuses

the much-improved tracking and tracing of the GM's micro-ridge stylus, this "dual-mono" optical/electrical engine raised the bar in every audible and measurable category. Channel separation (and, hence, soundstage width, depth, and height) was substantially increased, and the very low noise floor (always a huge plus with Aki's oc's) was lowered even further, making for the kind of silent backgrounds and abundant musical detail that you only hear on reel-to-reel analog tape—and in a concert hall, of course.

Though digital fans are used to it (or at least to a frighteningly dead, interstellar version of it), this depth of background silence is new in LP playback. As I've said before, we analog hounds have becomes so inured to the way in which RF audibly modulates the signal that a transducer/phonostage *without* RF simply must be experienced to be believed. Even then, it's hard to fathom. It's as if you've been listening to music with your window open on a noisy street. All of a sudden, the DS Audio closes the window. You just hear so much more, so much more purely and faithfully.

Thanks to the oc's inherent rise in the bass, which, in theory, goes down to 1Hz, and absence of background racket (including the occasional AM station or passing CB), its similarity to the sound of R2R tape (which also has a robust low end and little-to-no susceptibility to RF) is far closer than what you get from conventional magnetic playback. As a result, the DS Audio Grand Master is a revelation to fidelity-to-source listeners, for whom the sound of the mastertape is the golden fleece. However, it's also a dream come true for as-you-like-it and absolute-sound listeners, since its noise-free clarity is accompanied by rich, full, unusually deep-reaching tonality, excellent imaging and soundstaging, superb dynam-

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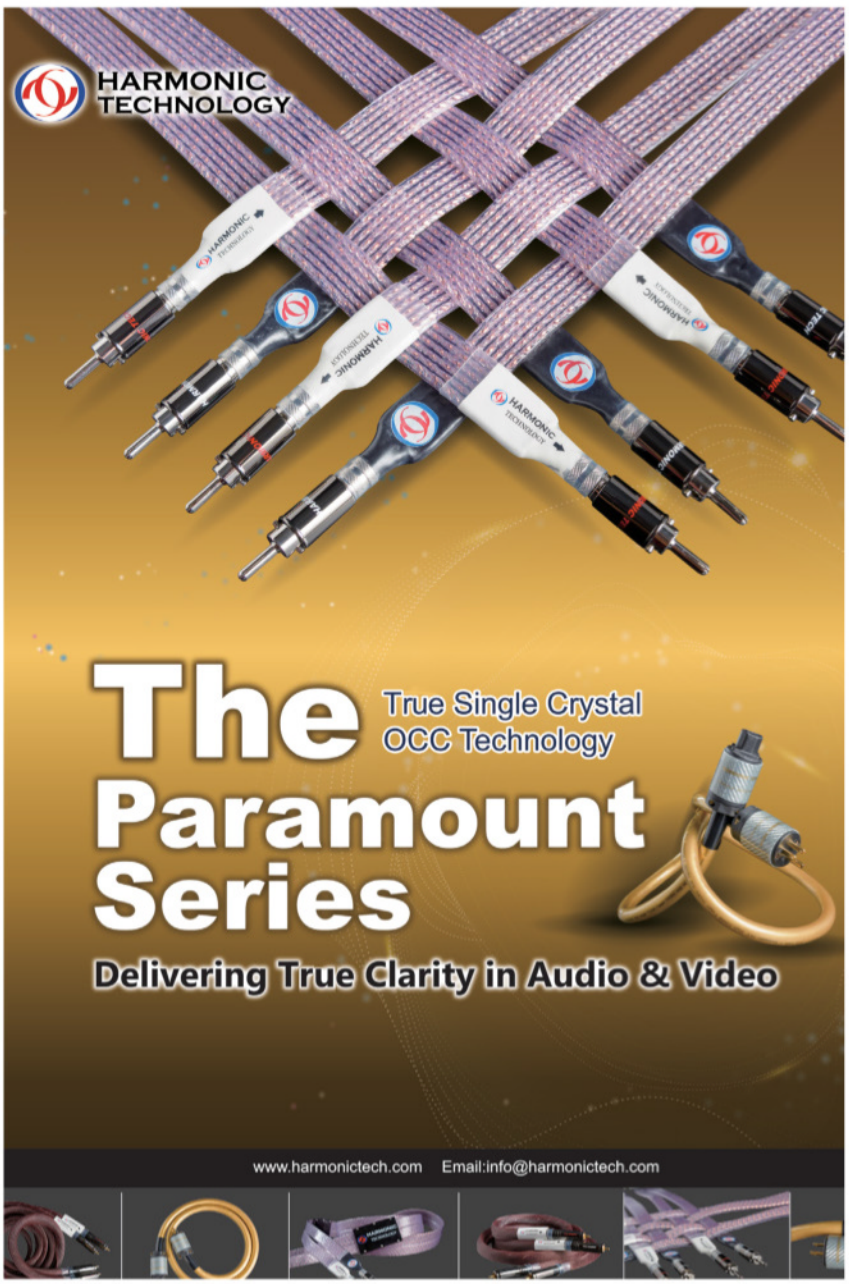
ic response, and the genuine illusion of real musicians making music in a real space. Indeed, the only area in which the Grand Master doesn't challenge or equal the sound of a great tape player is in the treble, where a rise in the topmost octave makes the Grand Master a little more scintillant than tape (though it is no longer bright sounding, since the rise now begins well above the presence range, about halfway through the brilliance range).

The trouble is—or was—that to get all these great new advancements you had to buy the $15k Grand Master cartridge. (If you wanted the whole megillah, you also had to chip in another $45k for the Grand Master phonostage/equalizer.)

However, hold onto your hats (and wallets). Aki has now "trickled down" much of the Grand Master technology into one of his latest "entry-level" products—the DS 003, the subject of this review. At "only" $2500 (with another $3500 for its dedicated DS 003 phonostage/equalizer), it is not dirt cheap. But $6k is still a far cry from $60k. What do you get for one-tenth the money? Well…just about everything that makes the Grand Master the benchmark that it is.




No, you don't get that micro-ridge stylus. You'll just have to live with a line-contact diamond one. And you don't get the diamond cantilever; the DS 003's is aluminum. Though sleek, rigid, and extremely well damped, the DS 003's body is machined from A5052 aluminum and not from the GM's ultra-strong, ultra-light duralumin. These stylus/cantilever/chassis differences aside, however, there is not a whole lot else that separates the DS 003 cartridge from the Grand Master.

Like its ten-times more expensive brother, the DS 003 uses DS' new "dual-mono" optical/electrical generator, with independent LEDs and photodetectors for each channel. Like the Grand Master, it uses a featherweight, 99.9% beryllium shading plate that is 50% lighter than the aluminum one used in DS Audio's previous oc's (prior to the Grand Master). And like the GM, the DS-Audio's internal wiring is 1.6 times thicker than it was in first- and second-gen DSes.

These advancements make for virtually the same kind of sonic improvements that they do in the Grand Master. Because of the dual-mono setup, channel separation is greatly enhanced—to the benefit of soundstaging and imaging. (Andre Jennings measured 32dB+ channel separation at 1kHz, where the first-gen DS oc's barely made it to 20dB.) The reduction in mass (claimed to be 1/10$^{th}$ that of a conventional mc cartridge) helps to improve tracking and lower noise to a near-inaudible level, increasing resolution and dynamic range. (The more-affordable first- and second-gen DSes had trouble tracking highly modulated passages on LPs and collected dust like Swiffers; the third-gen DS 003 has *no* such issues, tracking tough grooves and plowing through debris like a Clearaudio Goldfinger.) The better wiring and improved equalization (for which see the next paragraph) helps render tonality in the same lusciously rich, full-bodied, deep-reaching fashion that you hear on the GM, with tape, and in life.

Like the Grand Master unit, the DS 003's companion phonostage/equalizer benefits from thicker circuit boards (increased from

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## How the DS 003 Brought One Record to Life

**DURING THE AXPONA** show, I bought some LPs, as I usually do. One of them was a new album by two favorites: Taj Mahal and Ry Cooder. I probably shouldn't admit this, but I'm old enough to remember hearing a teenage Ry Cooder playing guitar for Taj Mahal (before Ry left the band and was replaced by Jesse Ed Davis), about the time that Taj's first album was released. Back then, before stadium rock changed the playing field, you could actually sit a few feet away from the performers and watch them interact. That kid could play slide guitar!

Taj and Ry's new album is a tribute to Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee—the two old hands who had, perhaps, the biggest influence on both of these expert latter-day bluesmen. The album, called *Get On Board: The Songs of Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee* [Nonesuch], is the first time Taj and Cooder have reunited on LP in 50-some years. I could say it was worth the wait, but the truth is that I wish they'd done this a long time ago—and hope they do it again.

Though the album is relatively primitive sonically—a stripped-down session, the product of three days spent in Ry Cooder's son Joachim's CA living room, without the usual layer of note-perfect re-dos, echo/spatial effects, overdubs, and sweetening that we've all grown used to—it is still a musical delight. Just two (now elderly) blues players performing the music they grew up with and still love. In a way they've become the artists they admired and aspired to be—with harmonicist/vocalist Taj taking the Sonny Terry role and guitarist/vocalist Ry the Brownie McGhee one (and percussionist Joachim taking the part of Coyal McMahan, who played maracas on the Terry and McGhee 1952 original *Get On Board* [Folkways]). The new album sounds homebrewed but good (kind of like a more ragged The Band's *The Band*).

Of course, I wouldn't have known it sounded good if I hadn't heard it on my own system via the DS Audio DS 003. When I listened to it in Chicago (I won't tell you on which system), it sounded kind of awful—paper-thin, dry, screechy, unappealing. It's funny how much sound quality can affect your reaction to a performance and to the music being performed (which, come to think of it, could be the motto of this magazine).

When I came back from Chicago, I was regretting the twenty bucks I'd squandered. Then I listened to the album again through the DS 003, the Stenheim Alumine Five SEs, the Soulution 711 power amp, and the Zanden 3100 linestage preamp, wired with Crystal Cable Da Vinci. Wotta difference!

The emaciated sound (Taj, whom I've seen live many times, was unrecognizable in Chicago) suddenly packed on needed pounds, gaining lifelike color, power, detail, three-dimensional body, in-the-room-with-you presence. Honestly, I wouldn't have believed it was the same LP. Oh, the engineering was still rough and home-brewed, but the DS-Audio DS 003 (and all that other good stuff) turned it from a regret to a must-own/must-play. Such is the transformative power of first-rate high-end equipment. And the DS 003 oc is first rate.

**The DS Audio DS 003 will certainly be my nominee for TAS Phono Cartridge of the Year.**

1.6mm to 2.0mm) and denser copper-foil traces (up from 35µ to 70µ). Of course, the compact DS 003 phonostage is not nearly as large, complex, and state of the art as the two-chassis Grand Master one. Though it does provide four different roll-off curves for the low frequencies (the GM has six), it doesn't have the flexibility, power-supply storage capacitance, channel separation, S/N ratio, etc. of the pricey GM. As a result, the sound of the cartridge played back through it is just a little less firmly controlled in the low end, finely resolved in the midband, vast in staging, and tape-like smooth top to bottom. (If you run the DS 003 through the Grand Master phonostage, as I did for an experiment, you will see that the primary sonic difference-maker here is the DS 003 equalizer, not the cartridge itself.) Ten times more dollars better buy you something, and it does in the DS Audio line, though the extent of improvement which that added investment makes will depend, to a degree, on the transparency of your speakers, amplification, and turntable.

It is now time for the traditional "and then I listened to" portion of the review (see sidebar). However, in this case it's not really necessary, as the virtues of the DS 003 can be summed up in a few words. To wit, no, the DS 003 duo (cartridge/phonostage) is not the equal of the Grand Master duo (particularly the phonostage), but it comes so close to the beautiful, transparent, spacious, noise-less, dynamic, uncannily tape-like (which is to say, uncannily life-like) sound of that paragon—on any recording of any kind of music—that I would be hard put to recommend the Grand Master ahead of it for most listeners.

If you have a system that is capable of highest-resolution playback, then by all means go whole hog and get the Grand Master set. You won't regret it. But if you don't have Magico M9s or Wilson Chronosonic XVXes or Stenheim References or Estelon Forzas or MBL 101 X-tremes or Maggie 30.7s—and you're not equipped with a Walker Audio Proscenium, Acoustic Signature Invictus Neo, Basis Transcendence, TechDAS Air Force Zero, or top-line Soulution, Constellation, Pilium, CH Precision, Zanden, Air Tight, etc. amplification (with appropriate cabling and interconnect, of course)—then the choice is easy: Go for the DS 003. Maybe even if you do have these goodies, you'd want to think about it. This is just a marvelous transducer. It will certainly be my nominee for TAS Phono Cartridge of the Year. tas

# INT-25

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# Acoustic Signature Maximus Neo Turntable, TA-1000 Tonearm, and MCX3 Cartridge

## A Remarkable Achievement

Dick Olsher

**Located in the small town of Süßen, Germany, about** a 45-minute drive from Stuttgart, Acoustic Signature (AS) has been at the forefront of turntable technology for the past 25 years. One of its keys to success is taking control of the entire manufacturing process. Robert Harley tells me that he was impressed during his factory visit by the fact that everything is machined in-house, down to the smallest tonearm parts. The development of the Neo Series reflects the culmination of its anti-vibration and diamond-coated bearing technologies. Our JV has previously reviewed the flagship Invictus and Invictus Jr. models and concluded as follows: "The word is thrown around too freely in this business, but to my ear the Invictus Jr. with the TA-9000 tonearm is Gunther Frohnhoefer's masterpiece—certainly the best turntable/tonearm Acoustic Signature has made and certainly one of the best analog source components you can buy." The Maximus is the entry-level turntable in the line—a two-speed, belt-drive design, that benefits from the technology intrinsic to its much more expensive family members.

Each turntable in the Neo line is outfitted with an individualized version of the Dura Turn Diamond bearing, which is not only super-rigid for low noise, but also exceptionally rugged with a long service life. That explains the bearing's 15-year warranty. The spindle is made of hardened stainless steel that is precision ground and then plasma-coated to yield a diamond-like surface. Both the chassis (aka plinth) and platter are machined from aluminum; the platter weighing in at a substantial 12.8 pounds. A single motor is used, which is powered by an external switch-mode DC power supply that can accommodate mains voltages in the range of 100V to 260V. Although the motor pulley has two grooves, the intent is to use only a single belt on the lower groove. Start-up time is about 10 seconds before stable platter speed is achieved.

Isolation and leveling are provided via three gel-damped feet. Still, it would be a good idea to site the turntable on an isolation platform. I used an old Townshend

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# Absolute Analog Acoustic Signature Maximus Neo, TA-1000, and MCX3

## Specs & Pricing

**Maximus Neo turntable**
**Drive system:** RPM-regulated belt drive with speed fine adjustment
**Speed range:** 33.3 and 45rpm
**Dimensions:** 415 x 120 x 315mm
**Tonearm compatibility:** 9 inches
**Weight:** 18 kg
**Price:** $4995

**TA-1000 Neo tonearm**
**Effective length:** 293.3 mm
**Mounting distance (from pivot to center of platter):** 222mm
**Total weight:** 439g
**Effective mass:** 9.3g
**Cartridge balance range:** 6 to 16g
**Mounting:** Rega & SME styles
**Connectors:** 5-pin to RCA/ground connector
**Price:** $2495

**MCX3 mc cartridge**
**Cartridge type:** Moving coil
**Stylus type:** Nude fine line
**Coil material:** 4N copper
**Voltage output:** 0.35mV (at 1kHz, 5cm/sec)
**Channel balance at 1kHz:** <1.2dB
**Channel separation at 1kHz:** > 24dB
**Compliance, dynamic, lateral:** 15m/mN
**Tracking force range:** 2.1 to 2.5g
**Recommended tracking force:** 2.3g
**Frequency response:** 20–20,000Hz (±1.5dB)
**DC resistance:** 5 ohms
**Recommended load:** 100 ohms
**Cartridge weight:** 12.6g
**Price:** $1695

**AS-DISTRIBUTION GMBH**
Hillenbrand Strasse 10
73079 Suessen
Germany
acoustic-signature.com

**RUTHERFORD AUDIO (U.S. Distributor)**
rutherfordaudio.com

**Associated Equipment**
**Speakers:** Analysis Audio Omega, Fleetwood Sound Company DeVille, QUAD ESL-57
**Preamplifier:** AudioPrism Mantissa, Wavebourn Audio Research Labs Preamp+, Blue Velvet line preamp, Classé Audio CP-47.5
**Power amplifier:** SMc Audio DNA-1/GT-21 Ultra, 47 Laboratory 4717 Shigaraki, Canor Audio AI 1.10, Rogers British HiFi E20a/ii
**Cable & interconnects:** Acrotec, FMS Nexus-2 & Kimber KCAG interconnects; Acrotec 6N; Kimber KCAG & ChromaLeaf Canare 4S11speaker cable
**Accessories:** Sound Application CF-X & TT-7 power line conditioners

Audio Seismic Sink to improve isolation from structural-borne vibrational energy. The Maximus avoids the pitfall of placing a resonant cavity directly under the platter. Designs with a boxy wooden plinth, such as the vintage Acoustic Research AR XA turntable, are susceptible to midrange colorations. It's a finding I discovered many years ago when I parked a turntable on top of a wooden box. To my amazement, this resulted in a substantial "boxy"-sounding midrange.

It should be noted that in reality this review encompasses a nearly complete AS analog front end, as the Maximus Neo was supplied with a 9" SME-style TA-1000 tonearm, a Grip Mk3 record clamp, and an MCX3 mc cartridge, manufactured by Ortofon to AS specs. Acoustic Signature's tonearm features a dual-layer carbon armtube and precision miniature ball bearings. It provides for adjustable VTA, azimuth, and anti-skating force. VTF is set via a brass counterweight. It is a perfect match in terms of weight for the MCX3 mc, a sophisticated cartridge featuring a hefty output of 0.35mV, high-purity copper coils, and a housing optimized for low resonance. The cartridge is outfitted with a nude-mounted "fine line" diamond stylus that is capable of retrieving plenty of detail from a record groove.

Setup was fairly easy, though it should be noted that "easy" is a relative term and depends on how much experience you have with this sort of thing. The entire process was aided by clear and detailed instructions. The tonearm installation was greatly simplified by the inclusion of an excellent alignment tool that allows for precise setting of the spindle-to-pivot distance, as well as adjustment of cartridge overhang and offset angle. The only awkward part of the process involved VTA adjustment. This required loosening the VTA lock screw and some manual dexterity in sliding the tonearm up or down within the flange. I guess I've been spoiled by the Kuzma Stogi Ref 313VTA tonearm with its precision VTA adjustment capability. Setting of VTF requires a gauge, my current favorite being the Ortofon DS-1 digital scale. I started out at 2.1g VTF but ended up at 2.3g, which is the recommended setting for the MCX3.

During my initial listening sessions, a couple of problems surfaced—namely, a slightly wiry treble range coupled with diminished tonal color saturation. However, I was confident that these issues could be resolved by tweaking the system. I ended up replacing the stock leather mat with a Boston Audio Mat-1 and, of course, adjusting the VTA and VTF to compensate for the increased thickness of the Mat-1. It helps to slip a flat washer on top the Mat's record label area to minimize the potential for dishing out the record. In combination with the Grip Mk3 clamp, the Mat-1 made for a dramatic increase in sound quality. Upper registers were now smooth; bass lines tightened up; and tonal colors were spot on. In hindsight, it is clear that the Boston Audio Mat-1 is much more effective in damping energy punched into the vinyl by the stylus than the stock mat. I can't imagine any turntable claiming state-of-the-art status without an effective vinyl hold-down system. Weights, clamps, and even vacuum

AMG

ANALOG MANUFAKTUR GERMANY

AMG turntables, tonearms, and all associated components are manufactured in southern Germany under the guidance of company head Julian Lorenzi. With a state-of-the-art factory, a small group of expert machinists, and precision tooling, AMG creates elegant high-performance analog playback devices for the most discerning listeners.

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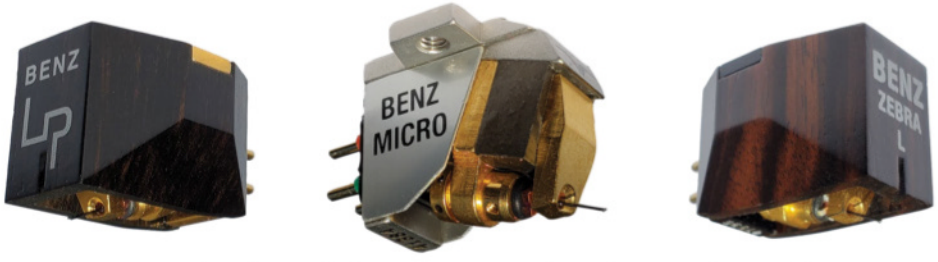
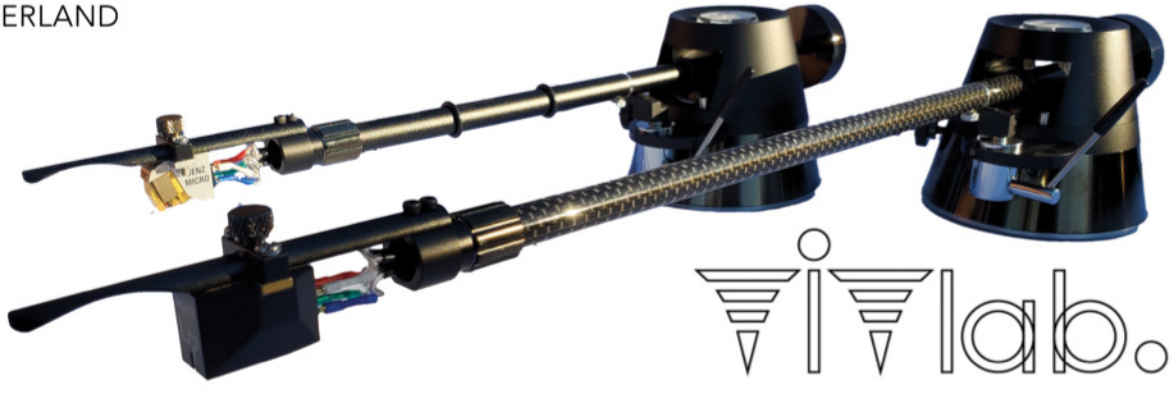



Recognized and awarded for their musicality, clarity, and warmth, Benz Micro Switzerland continues to produce some of the finest MC phono cartridges in the world. With a generous trade-in program, and available US inventory, there has never been a better time to buy a Benz cartridge.



ViV lab.

Designed and manufactured in Kamakura Japan, the ViV Lab Rigid Float tonearm represents a radical departure from conventional tonearm design and offers performance unmatched by other tonearms in its price range. Its unique geometry eliminates the need for anti-skate and its free-standing oil-damped bearing achieves the ultimate in resonance control, allowing your cartridge to realize its full potential.

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suction are all attempts to intimately couple vinyl to a dissipative medium. In all these cases, it's critical that the mat's acoustic impedance match that of vinyl, and carbon (aka pure graphite) seems to hold an advantage in this regard.

I also spent some time with several phonostages to find an optimal match. I briefly tried the AS Tango Mk3, but it wasn't a good fit for my system. In the end, I defaulted to the Sound Tradition MC-10 step-up, followed by the all-tube Wright Sound WPP200C, which is much sweeter sounding than a comparable solid-state device. It was at this point that I began to fully appreciate this system's potential. At no time was my attention distracted by the MCX3 mc. Unlike many mc cartridges that seem to etch the treble range, it was consistently detailed yet easy to listen to. Reproduction of violin overtones was pure and sufficiently sweet to satisfy even a tube aficionado such as me. Generally speaking, bright or otherwise hyped-up recordings were not exacerbated, which was a blessing since not all recordings are reference quality. Soundstage transparency was superb. With my eyes closed, it was easy to get lost in a 3D gestalt of a concert hall acoustic. Rhythmic drive and transient timing were nicely fleshed out. Microdynamic nuances bloomed from a black background. Command of dynamic peaks was such that the music's intensity shone through with no apparent compression.

To assess performance using human voice, I brought out my QUAD ESLs, which were extensively upgraded by Electrostatic Solutions many years ago. I don't know of any other speaker capable of reproducing human voice more naturally. Of course, this is also a function of the matching power amplifier. I had previously used a refurbished Futterman H-3 OTL as a reference, but I recently discovered that the 47 Laboratory 4717 Shigaraki integrated amplifier sounds magical in this context. This setup produced a few wow moments. For example, the well-known 1987 recording of *Misa Criolla* (Creole Mass) by Ariel Ramirez (Philips 420955-1) never sounded any better. The resolution of individual voices in the chorus was superb, as was the corpus and glowing timbre of soloist José Carreras.

Just how good is this AS analog playback system? I have been using it regularly for several weeks by now, and I'm in no rush to switch back to my Kuzma Reference turntable. A turntable is all about spinning vinyl with speed accuracy and minimal bearing chatter. The Maximus Neo does an excellent job of that. (In German engineering I trust.) Configured as a system to include the Boston Audio Mat and the Grip Mk3 record clamp, the Maximus Neo sounds far superior to any entry-level system I've auditioned over the years. That's clearly a testament to the synergy of the Maximus Neo system components. In fact, I'm convinced that it can hold its own in the company of far more expensive systems. My guesstimate is that it offers about 70% of the sound quality of the most elite systems. And that's high praise, indeed. So, what exactly would you be missing relative to a much more expensive system? In audiophile terms, mainly enhanced image focus, smoother harmonic textures, and increased dynamic conviction. In absolute terms, a closer approach to the real thing. Still, this is a remarkable achievement at its asking price. tas

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# Totem Acoustic Element Fire V2 Loudspeaker

## Punching Above Its Weight

Andrew Quint

**I learned recently that my 34-year-old nephew would** be relocating from the Midwest to the large eastern city where my wife and I live, in fact to a neighborhood near ours. It's welcome news. He's a wonderful person—smart, funny, and generous—and it'll be great to have him around for all those reasons. But there's also, I'll admit it, the whole speaker thing. Finally, there will be somebody nearby to help me move large loudspeakers.

Seriously, that's one of the problems with big speakers—they're big. Unpacking them and getting them into the ideal position in a room (if there even *is* an ideal position) often requires the assistance of another person who can confidently maneuver a heavy, bulky object without harming that object or himself. It's worth it, we remind ourselves, for low-frequency extension, coherency at high volumes, and the potential to approximate realistic musical scale. Smaller speakers, in general, have trouble with those things. Nonetheless, even if you'll be leaving a large floorstander in one place for an extended time and thus don't need a nephew for periodic assistance, you may still yearn for the well-known virtues of smaller transducers. These include their greater flexibility in terms of placement and their ability to render acoustic space, as well as their greater aesthetic appeal to non-audiophiles. We shouldn't pretend otherwise—you must be willing to forgo some dynamic impact and deep bass. But not all small loudspeakers are created equal: When it comes to "loud and low," some can punch considerably above their weight class. The Totem Acoustic Element Fire V2 is one such speaker.

The second generation of Totem's Element models—there are two, the Metal V2 floorstander ($17,000) and the Fire V2 ($7500) considered here—were introduced in 2019. On casual inspection, the Fire looks like an unobtrusive rectangular box but, in fact, the enclosure eschews parallel walls to prevent the propagation of internal standing waves. The backward slope of the speaker's top surface represents the most apparent asymmetry; the Fire V2's height is about 16.6" in front but just 14.6" to the rear. Totem fabricates the cabinet from varying densities of ¾" MDF, the internal surfaces coated with borosilicate to fortify the enclosure structurally and to increase its longevity. A consumer has a choice of two colors for the beautifully executed gloss finish, "ice" and "dusk," otherwise known as "white" and "black." Matching magnetic grilles are provided.

Both drivers in this ported two-way are designed, manufactured, and assembled in Montréal. The 1" titanium dome tweeter gets its own sub-enclosure and takes the Fire V2 out to 22kHz. It's the 7" Torrent mid/woofer that Totem is especially proud of. Unlike a typical driver chassis that is stamped, molded, or cast, the Fire's motor structure is machined from a substantial chunk of an aircraft-grade aluminum alloy, with the finished driver weighing in at close to 10 pounds. Totem states that it takes seven hours to fabricate one of these drivers and costs them $1000 to do so. The

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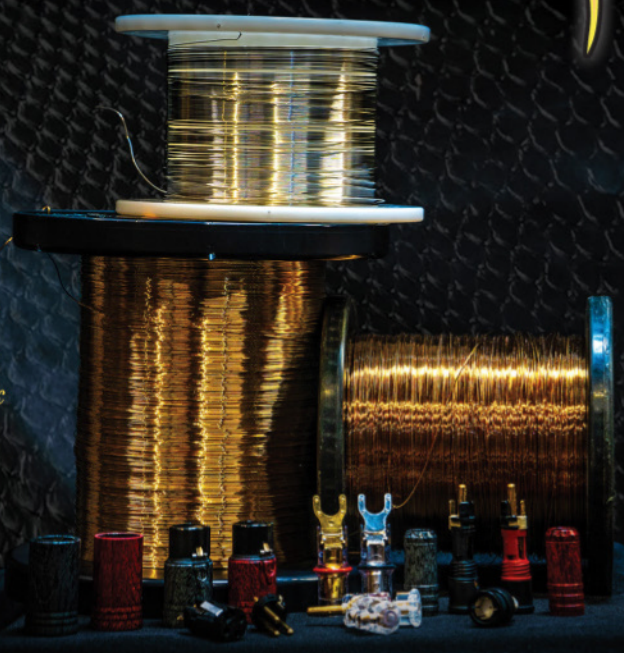

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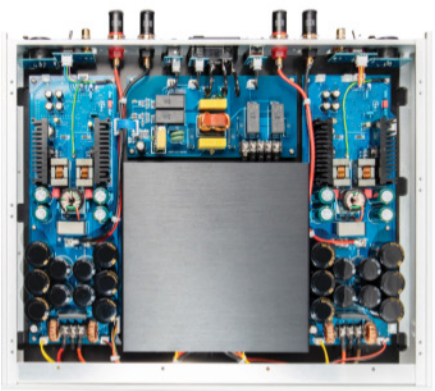

The Evolution STA is extremely neutral but never lean or clinical. It does magnificently well to lend weight, body, and saturation to instruments and vocals alike, with plenty of warmth if needed, but without ever tipping over into mushiness or ever sounding colored.

Power Output (RMS): 2x230W @ 8Ohms , 2x310W @ 4Ohms
THD+N, S/N (typical): @5W (0.0025% ,95db) , @50W (0.007% , 105db) , @100W (0.01% , 110db)

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## Specs & Pricing

**Type:** Two-way dynamic loudspeaker system
**Driver complement:** 1" titanium dome, 7" Torrent mid-range/woofer
**Frequency response:** 30Hz–22kHz
**Impedance:** 8 ohms
**Sensitivity:** 88dB
**Dimensions:** 8.8" x 16.6" x 11.7"
**Weight:** 32.4 lbs.
**Price:** $7500

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woofer employs 17 neodymium magnets, each 2.5" in length and having a purpose-specific claw shape that completely surrounds the voice coil, assuring interaction with a consistent magnetic field. The voice coil itself is wound with copper wire having a square profile to eliminate air gaps.

Designer Vince Bruzzese was aiming for simplicity with the Fire's crossover, a first-order, high-pass filter centered at 2.7kHz. The electromechanical characteristics of the 7" Torrent driver eliminate any need for a low-pass filter, and the woofer operates full-range. Bruzzese maintains that the crossover design optimizes phase and dispersion behaviors, and that the "prodigious" 17Hz free-air resonance of the Torrent woofer (with its potential for a 1" excursion) contributes substantially to the perceived speed, control, and spatiality of the finished product.

Around back are two pairs of WBT binding posts with a polished platinum finish. The length of wire connecting the two sets didn't inspire confidence, resembling an opened-up paper clip. This didn't matter to me, as I chose to bi-wire the Fire V2s, but those using a single pair of speaker cables may want to consider more robust after-market jumpers.

The manufacturer supplied a pair of British-made stands, intended for use with earlier Totem speakers and modified for the purpose of this review. They are not for sale; Totem considers them commercially unviable, as shipping costs became prohibitively high. I am confident, however, that any number of popular 24" stands, preferably with the potential for mass loading, will do just fine.

In my 225-square-foot room—the ceiling height varies from 10 to 12 feet—the Element Fire V2s ended up eight feet apart from dust cap to dust cap and ten feet from my ears. Canted in toward the listening position, there were 16 to 19 inches from the ceiling-to-floor CD shelves behind them. According to Totem, the Fire V2s can be sited as little as six inches from the front wall, depending "on electronics and room acoustics." This will certainly be advantageous to audiophiles lacking authorization to position loudspeakers out into a room that's a shared space.

The Totems were powered by Pass XA 60.8 monoblocks. I opted for a bi-wire connection, employing two pairs of T+A Speaker Hex cables, after A/B comparisons with a single-wire configuration of Transparent Audio Ultra cables left me with a preference for the former. The 60.8s were preceded in the audio chain by a Pass XP-22 linestage. I used both Baetis Reference 3 and 432 EVO Aeon music servers to render files; a Sony UBP-X1100ES served as a disc transport. All three digital sources delivered their zeros and ones to an Ideon Audio Epsilon Absolute DAC.

I have a Roon playlist of 30 music tracks selected to test some aspect of sound reproduction as I work through what TAS reviewer Anthony H. Cordesman has referred to as "the sonic checklist." Maybe I was just feeling lazy or passive, but one day I navigated to the playlist on my tablet, pressed "play" on Track 1 (the opening Allegretto of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 15 performed by Bernard Haitink and the Concertgebouw Orchestra) and just let it run until, several hours of music later, I got to Track 30 (Antônio Carlos Jobin's "Áquas de Março," sung by Elis Regina and the composer himself). My expectation was that I'd skip the tracks that were not working out with the little Totems and thus zero in on their strengths and limitations. As it turned out, I listened to all 30 cuts all the way through and enjoyed every one.

The biggest surprises were the selections that were the most demanding when it came to loudness and low-frequency information. The two pipe organ selections on the playlist—tracks from the Saint-Saëns "Organ" Symphony from Philadelphia/Eschenbach (Ondine) and Jean Guillou's 2-CD Franck album (Dorian)—both conveyed a good measure of the music's grandeur. Rock and pop recordings with well-recorded electric bass and kick drum delivered the requisite "sock" necessary for the music to satisfy—"Wrapped Around Your Finger" from Kevyn Lettau's *Songs of the Police* and "Too Proud," sung by Terry Evans on the treasurable *Bluesquest* collection produced by Joe Harley. And when the 13 saxes, trumpets, and trombones of Gordon Goodwin's Big Phat Band play full-out on the title track from *Act Your Age,* the Fire V2s rendered the chart at a quite enthusiastic volume without losing its composure.

This capacity to sound like a much bigger loudspeaker was apparent as soon as the Totems arrived and got better over the weeks that followed. Totem's literature states that the Fire V2s require 200–300 hours to break in. This kind of thing annoys some audiophiles who feel that components, speakers, and wires ought to be fully "ripe" when they get them, but it's true. I take some basic measurements from the listening position with almost every speaker that comes for review using a Dayton Omnimic V2 System. The reason, actually, is to adjust the settings on my Magico S-Sub to optimize its integration with the speakers being reviewed but, first, the main speakers alone need to be measured before the sub is turned on.

Yair Tammam, Magico's CTO who guides me with these measurements, noted

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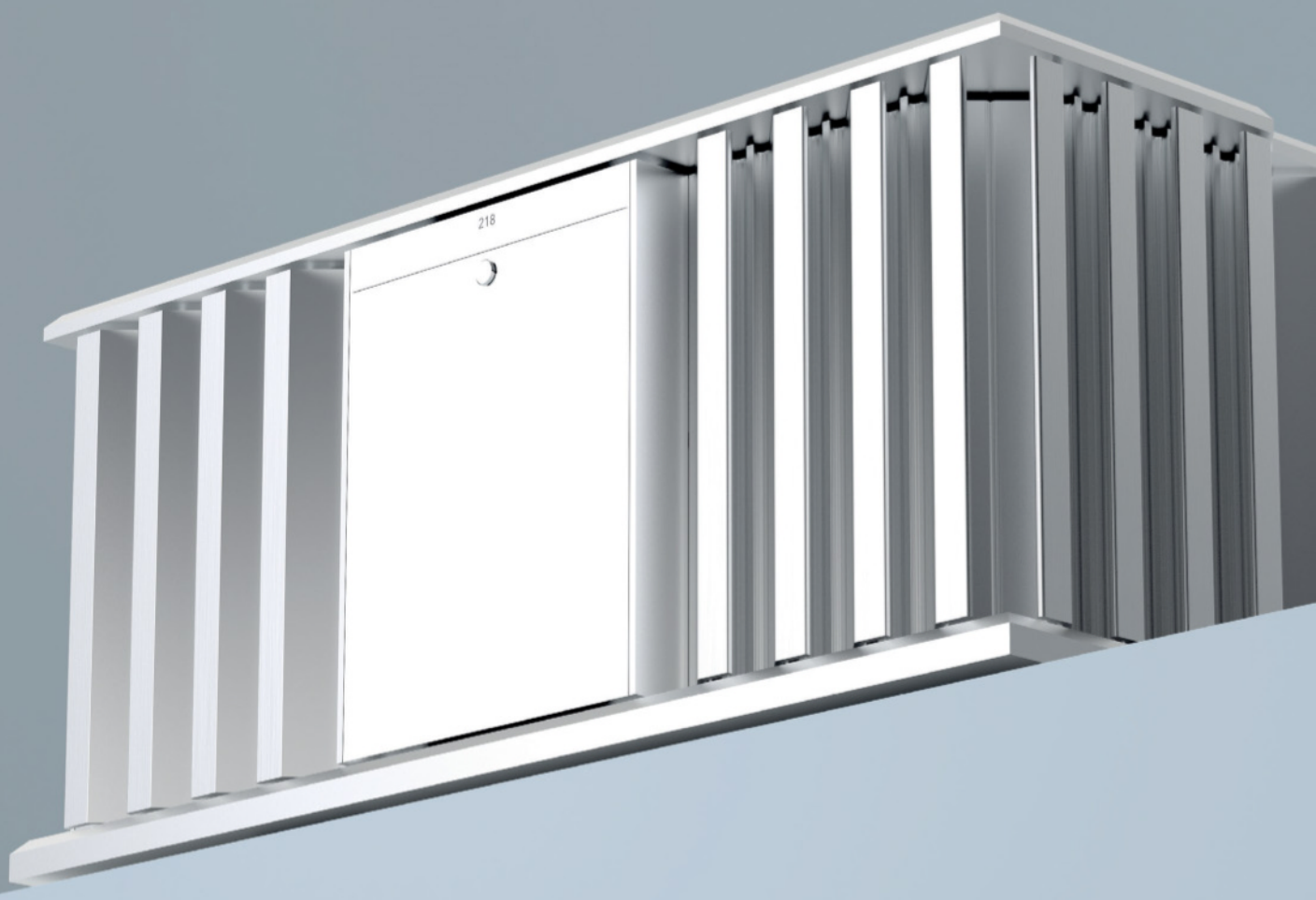


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that with a bass-reflex loudspeaker, the port is tuned to the output of a driver or drivers *that have been broken in.* When we made fresh measurements after some weeks of break-in, enough had changed that it was necessary to lower the crossover frequency by 25Hz. Some patience is necessary with the Element Torrent driver (as it is with most quality loudspeakers) to fully realize its potential, and there's really no way for a consumer to accelerate the process. "Nine women can't make a baby in one month," Yair observed soberly. He cited Jewish tradition as to the source of the proverb, though the Internet appears to attribute it to Warren Buffet.

The Fire V2s also handled rapidly changing dynamics impressively, what is sometimes referred to as "jump factor." One example, ubiquitous at audio shows, is Nils Lofgren's virtuosic live performance of "Keith Don't Go," which has the artist accompanying himself on an electrified Takamine 12-string acoustic. The guitar practically leaps out of the little Totems.

With other audio parameters, the kind stand-mounted monitors typically excel with, the Totems did not disappoint. Detail? Is there really a meticulously devised part for woodblock on "Why Worry?" from Dire Straits' *Brothers in Arms* that I've missed for a few decades? There is. Color? Joel Frederiksen registers as a true *basso profundo* and not a mere bass when he sings "Whittingham Faire" on *The Elfin Night,* a song most of the world knows as "Scarborough Fair." Musical texture? Check out the Hagen Quartet playing the slow movement of Beethoven's Op. 18, No. 3. It won't surprise you that this group's been playing together for more than 40 years with just two personnel changes. Speed? With Marc-André Hamelin performing his own Étude No. 6, a tribute to Scarlatti, the Totems keep up with the pianist's jaw-dropping technique yet somehow reveal that there's a person behind the playing and not a machine. Imaging and soundstage representation are first rate. With the Shostakovich performance referenced above, one can readily discern that the solo bassoon sits a row behind the solo flute within the Concertgebouw's woodwind section. From the standpoint of musical scaling, the Fire V2 accurately sizes the seven instruments performing Stravinsky's *L'histoire du soldat* under the direction of Paavo Järvi.

How did integration with the subwoofer work out? Better the second time around, after a month of break-in and a downward reset of the crossover frequency between Fire and S-Sub. Still, there was a strong contrast between my SW experience with the Element Fire V2 and the one I had with another stand-mount I liked very much, the Audiovector R1 Arreté. With the Danish loudspeaker, I felt that providing additional bass support was usually beneficial with most musical genres. In the case of the Totem speaker, I appreciated the additional weight that the S-Sub brought to large-scale symphonic music and, yes, the most over-the-top French organ music achieved a full measure of Gothic majesty. But with most pop/rock and with acoustic bass in small-group jazz, subwoofer augmentation was often a mixed blessing with a loss of LF clarity and top-to-bottom continuity.

My own listening environment can accommodate fairly large loudspeakers. Products like Wilson Sashas, Bowers & Wilkins 801 D4s, Von Schweikert Audio Endeavor E-5s, or my current Magico M2s have worked out a lot better than you might have anticipated, I think because of the high ceiling, plus the presence of a hallway off to one side. I know now that I *could* continue to listen with pleasure to the large-scale music that matters to me if, for some reason, the big speakers had to go. The Totem Acoustics Element Fire V2s would do the job in my room and, I suspect, quite a few real-world spaces out in the world. For the time being, it'll continue to employ large speakers as my reference transducers. But my nephew could easily decide to return to the Midwest in a few years. I now know that I can deal with that. tas

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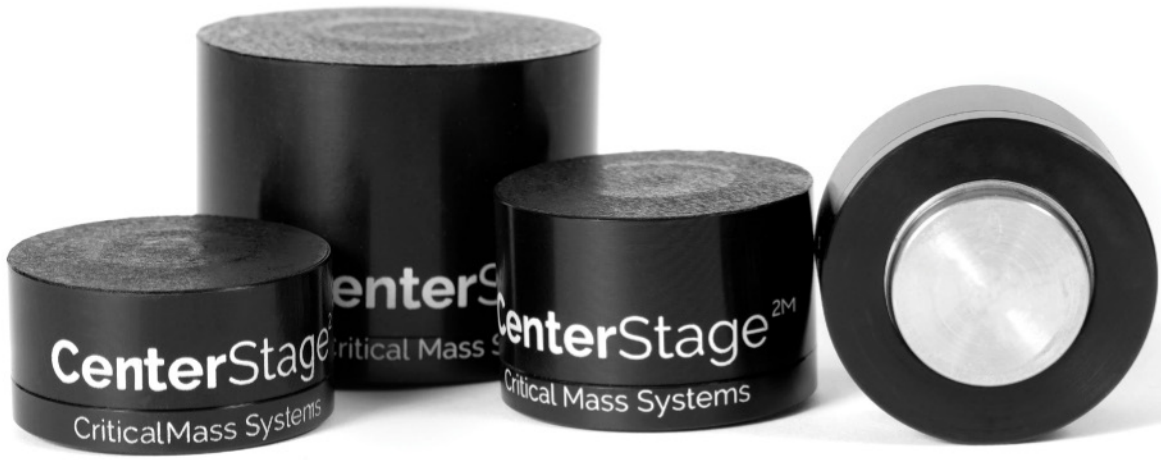


# Critical Mass Systems CenterStage$^{2M}$ Audio Feet

## Success At Last!

Jonathan Valin

**Critical Mass Systems' Joe Lavrencik has been designing** and fabricating various types of vibration-control devices for many years now. (I can remember hearing his first stand-alone boxes almost two decades ago.) He is a serious inventor, and each new generation of his products has been more effective than the last, culminating in the massive, handsome-looking, and pricey Olympus and MAXXUM stands and platforms, which do precisely what they're intended to do—kill the effects of airborne, floorborne, and self-generated vibration via constrained-layer damping without any major sonic trade-offs.

This has not always been the case with Joe's gear—and with vibration-control systems in general. His initial CMS offerings, for instance, lowered background noise and smoothed out jittery frequency response quite effectively, but they also took a toll in dynamic life, rather in the same way that plugging power amplifiers into older-gen power conditioners killed dynamics. Similar compromises affected Joe's smaller devices, particularly his cylindrical CenterStage audio feet, which replace factory-installed footers beneath electronic components.

Though intended to do precisely the same job that CMS' latest platforms and stands do so successfully—reduce vibration-induced noises via constrained-layer damping—to my ear the first-gen CenterStages didn't really do much of anything, save slightly deaden the sound. While other folks heard their effect more positively, I ended up thinking there wasn't enough "there" there to justify the CenterStages' not-insubstantial cost.

As he did with his equipment stands, Joe kept tinkering, and his later-gen CenterStage$^2$, introduced several years ago, was, indeed, more effective, audibly smoothing out frequency response and slightly enriching timbre with less of a price in liveliness. Though I liked CenterStage$^2$'s a good deal better than Joe's earlier versions, I still didn't like their effects well enough to keep sets of them in place under my electronics.

**The CenterStage$^{2M}$ is an unqualified triumph. The differences it makes under any and all components are unmistakable and entirely for the better.**

Comes now an even-newer generation of CenterStage footer, the CenterStage$^{2M}$, and though I don't really know what has changed in its design and construction (in a note to me, Joe's explanation of what he'd done was rather too high-falutin and non-specific to be of much help), I gather from his website that the "sequencing" and "proportioning" of the materials used in the CenterStage$^{2M}$ have changed. In addition, "damping" has been added "in the very last stage in an amount that would eliminate the internal noise of the product and the component without rolling off the top end of the acoustic envelope."

Whatever he has done, to my ear Joe has finally and fully succeeded. The CenterStage$^{2M}$ is an unqualified triumph. The differences it makes under any and all components are unmistakable and entirely for the better. Available in three progressively larger, taller, and more effective versions, CenterStage$^{2M}$'s do three things that I really like: reduce noise, increase density of tim-

# Brinkmann Audio Edison Mk II

*Hybrid Phono Stage*

2020 2021 2022
the absolute sound EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

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*„The Edison provided a rock-solid rendition of this trio, the best I've hitherto heard."*

*- Jacob Heilbrunn, The Absolute Sound, January 2020*

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bre (particularly in the bass and lower midrange), and improve clarity. Just as important is what they don't do, which is markedly soften or roll-off the treble, blunt transients, constrain dynamic range, or reduce dimensionality.

I'll give you one example, which can stand in for all the components I've used a quartet of the CenterStage2M's with. You wouldn't think (or, at least, I wouldn't have thought) that footers would have a profound effect on the sonics of a world-class tape deck such as the Metaxas & Sins Tourbillon T-RX (which, along with the United Home Audio SuperDeck, was already the most lifelike source component I'd ever heard). But you'd (and I'd) be wrong.

Of course, a tape deck does add vibration in a way that static electronic components don't. It has two large moving parts—ten-inch reels—that can wobble a bit in motion, thanks to the slight unevenness of NAB hubs. This constant, low-level vibration is transmitted through the entire deck (and into whatever it is sitting on), which is why studio decks are often built-into massive stands. Sticking four CenterStage2M's under the U-shaped bracket and cylindrical "feet" of the Tourbillon seemed more like a recipe for instability than for lower noise and better sound, but it turned out to be a sonic wonderment. Indeed, the size and quality of the improvement startled me.

Tone color, which was already outstanding, suddenly became richer and more natural, particularly in the midbass and lower midrange (which weren't thin to begin with). Understand that this was not a "lumping up" of energy (as with the port effect of certain speakers); it was just a more lifelike fullness that not only added density to timbre but focus and dimensionality to the instruments producing that timbre. In addition, transient detail seemed to "stand out" with greater clarity, as if traces of background noise had been washed away like chalk marks sponged off a blackboard. The net result was an unmistakable increase in neutrality and completeness, and hence in the magical illusion of real instruments and instrumentalists playing (near visibly) in a real space.

Where I couldn't wholeheartedly recommend previous iterations of CenterStages, the CenterStage2M's are a different matter. I can and do recommend them for use under all components, as their upside is now substantial and their downside indetectable. Let me warn you in advance that these little cylindrical devices aren't cheap. If I knew what was inside them, I might be able to say that their material construction justifies their cost. But I don't, so I can't. What I can say, however, is that their sonic benefits make them worth their price. tas

## Specs & Pricing

**Price:** CenterStage2M 0.8" (height), $280 each; CenterStage2M 1.0" (height), $545 each; CenterStage2M 1.5" (height), $795 each (sold in sets of four, with shims supplied)

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# NuPrime Audio Evolution STA Power Amplifier

## (Class) D-Lightful

Dick Olsher

**In case you're wondering, NuPrime Audio was founded** in 2014 by Jason Lim, who previously co-founded NuForce Audio, with the express goal of continuing NuForce's high-end product line. The Evolution STA amplifier is a prime example, nudging forward the state of the art in Class D amplification.

Right out of the box it was clear that this $4995 stereo amplifier meant business. Heavy for a Class D amp at a net weight of 23 pounds and sporting a power rating of 230Wpc into 8 ohms, it was ready to rock. The front panel is rather sparse looking with a small power LED and a power switch on the left that's well camouflaged and hard to pick out. No sex appeal here. Both RCA and XLR inputs are provided on the rear panel. Note that the amp is shipped with the voltage selector switch set to 230V. Be sure to slide it fully upward, if like me, you're in a 120V country.

In a Class D amplifier the power MOSFETs only have two states of operation, ON and OFF. The audio signal is embedded in a stream of square waves, whose width is proportional to the signal's amplitude. The width of the square wave determines the MOSFET's ON time. The longer the ON time, the closer the signal is pulled to the voltage rail of the amp. GaN MOSFETs have become popular in the last few years for Class D switching applications, and while NuPrime has experimented with these devices, it concluded that the familiar silicon MOSFETs allow better control of an amp's sonic character. The Evo STA uses NuPrime's proprietary low-loss switching technology, which is said to effectively reduce dead-time losses with increasing MOSFET temperature. This allows silicon-device switching at a frequency of 650–700kHz, approaching GaN device territory. The power stage topology is full bridge, providing push-pull differential operation with NuPrime's proprietary MOSFET drive design.

The front end is fully analog. Both the preamp stage and Class D pulse-modulation circuit use the NJR MUSES8820 op-amp, which was specifically designed for audio applications. According to NuPrime, it was selected on the basis of its natural, tonally dense, and warm sound character. "Other op-amps might have better specs, but they seem cold or emotionless when compared to the 8820."

The linear power supply benefits from a 550W, ultra-thin, toroidal power transformer and a total of 52,000uF filter capacitance. It has dual windings for dual outputs—to allow the left and right channels to be configured as mono amps. Kudos to NuPrime for opting to use a linear instead of a cheaper switching power supply. I haven't been a fan of the latter and tend to blame it for shortcomings in Class D amplification. The entire power path is compatible with 40-ampere current flow and features low-resistance terminals.

**What surprised me the most was the Evolution STA's ability to flesh out a believable depth perspective.**

Class D amplifiers typically use feedback to improve performance. Feedback here is taken after the low-pass output filter, basically including the speaker in the feedback loop. Dual feedback pathways are used—not only to maintain stable switching at 650kHz, but also to reduce distortion over the audio bandwidth of 5Hz to 50kHz. The resultant harmonic distortion products are said to measure 0.0025% at 5 watts at a signal-to-noise ratio (SNR) of 95dB, and 0.01% at 100 watts at a S/N ratio of 110dB. In addition to this feedback, the STA derives an error signal after the output stage and filter that is part of a proprietary distortion-canceling circuit that reportedly

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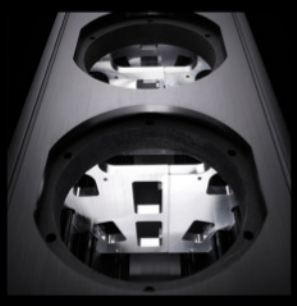

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reduces noise. Ultimately, a successful, high-end Class D amplifier requires some tradeoffs in terms of efficiency, distortion, and noise floor. It seems to me that in this case, NuPrime has made the right choices, opting for reduced distortion and noise.

Of course, these test bench measurements typically use a resistor as a load and do not reflect the impact of real-world speaker loads. Therefore, it was my objective to evaluate the NuPrime in the context of three dissimilar speakers—to assess any potential sonic issues.

First up was the Fleetwood Sound DeVille loudspeaker, a fairly benign 8-ohm bass-reflex load. Several sonic characteristics became evident rather quickly. First was the exceedingly low noise floor. Backgrounds appeared to be eerily quiet, more so than with the average solid-state amp and, obviously, without the tube-rush noise that I've become accustomed to. Second, resolution of low-level detail was superb. In particular, violin vibrato was exquisitely resolved with the sort of timing precision I've only experienced from far more expensive amps. But what surprised me the most was the Evolution STA's ability to flesh out a believable depth perspective. In fact, the soundstage was exceptionally transparent, wide, and deep, with believable image focus. So now I'm thinking to myself, can a Class D amp really dish out this sort of imaging? And then it got even better. Microdynamics were served up with emotional expressiveness. Orchestral crescendos were unfurled with tremendous power and control. And bass lines were punchy and tightly defined. It began to occur to me that this amp was going to be difficult to criticize.

As I was experimenting with front-end changes, it dawned on me that the Evo STA's personality was much like that of distilled water, lacking intrinsic flavor. As a consequence, it simply reflected the character of upstream components. It became a question of tailoring the front-end's tone to achieve an appealing sweet and warm system personality. For me that meant trying out several tube preamps to get the voicing just right. Throughout this process the NuPrime was exceptionally revealing of tube-rolling nuances. This

## Specs & Pricing

**Power output (RMS):** 230Wpc @ 8 ohms; 310Wpc @ 4 ohms
**Sensitivity (for rated power):** 2Vrms
**Input impedance:** 47k Ohm
**THD/S/N (typical):** @5W (0.0025% /95dB), @50W (0.007% /105dB), @100W (0.01% /110dB)
**Frequency response:** 10Hz–50kHz (-3dB)
**Standby power:** 1.5W @ 115VAC
**Idle Power:** 24W @ 115VAC
**Dimensions:** 430mm x 66.5mm x 372mm
**Weight:** 10.5 kg
**Price:** $4995

**NUPRIME INC.**
Taipei City, Taiwan
nuprimeaudio.com

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**ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT**
**Speakers:** Analysis Audio Omega, Fleetwood Sound Company DeVille, Innersound Isis 3.5
**Preamplifier:** AudioPrism Mantissa, Wavebourn Audio Research Labs Preamp+, Blue Velvet line preamp, Classé Audio CP-47.5
**Phono front end:** Kuzma Reference turntable, Kuzma Stogi Reference 313 VTA tonearm, Clearaudio da Vinci V2 MC phono cartridge; Bang & Olufsen Beogram 8000 turntable w/ MMC 20CL cartridge; Wright Sound WPP200C phonostage; Sound Tradition MC-10 step-up transformer
**Digital front end:** Audirvana 3.5 software; Qobuz Streaming; Denafrips Terminator DAC; Alldaq ADQ-USB 3.0 isolator
**Cable & interconnects:** Acrotec, Mogami & Kimber KCAG interconnects; Acrotec 6N; Kimber KCAG, ChromaLeaf Canare 4S11, Analysis Plus Oval 12, & Take Five Audio Cryo treated Mogami 3103 speaker cable
Accessories: Sound Application CF-X & TT-7 power line conditioners

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scenario was much different than that presented by, say, a single-ended triode amp, whose distortion spectrum is rich in even harmonics and as a result dominates a system's voicing. The NuPrime proved to be the total opposite. In this respect, it turned out to be a reference tool by providing a truthful sonic snapshot of upstream components.

Next in line was the Innersound Isis 3.5 hybrid electrostatic loudspeaker. This load has proven to be problematic for some Class D amplifiers due to its capacitive impedance and 2-ohm minimum through the upper octaves. Again, there was nothing of significance to criticize. A minor finding was a slight loss of treble air—an issue I've observed with other amps, as well. But otherwise, the NuPrime's strong suits were still on full display; soundstage transparency and depth perspective being first class. As you would expect from an electrostatic midrange and treble, transients were supremely well controlled, while the bass range was reproduced with control and full extension.

Finally, it was time for the Analysis Audio Omega. This quintessential planar speaker, an Apogee look-alike, has been a staple in my reference system for many years. It's a 4-ohm nominal load, though it dips to around 3 ohms and demands a lot of current. In this context the NuPrime was able to generate a panoramic soundstage and believable depth perspective. Its level of microdynamic finesse, purity of tone, resolution of individual voices in a complex mix, and rhythmic drive kept me listening late into the night.

On a challenging piece, such as the "Intolerance" track from *The Mighty Wurlitzer: Music for Movie Palace Organs* (New World Records 80227), the NuPrime was able to nicely capture the tonal complexity of a four-manual, 34-rank Wurlitzer Special that was built in 1928 for the Fisher Brothers (of auto-body fame). Here, but not with the Fleetwood DeVille, I was a bit disappointed with its limited macrodynamic reach. I expected more from an amp that is said to generate instantaneous power in excess of 360W into 3 ohms. It sounded like it was just stopping short of fully scaling dynamic peaks. For a better perspective, I switched over to a recent acquisition of mine, the SMc Audio DNA-1/GT-21 Ultra. This Class AB amplifier represents a complete overhaul of the venerable DNA-1 and incorporates Steve McCormack's latest circuit refinements and tweaks. On the Omega, the GT-21 Ultra was just crushing it with stupendous bass slam and macrodynamics that reached Olympian heights. It also became clear that the GT-21 Ultra offered better image focus, and as a result, more incisive spatial resolution. However, the NuPrime did have an edge in terms of soundstage dimensionality. Both amps resolved low-level detail exceedingly well, though the edge goes to the GT-21 Ultra.

The NuPrime Evo STA caught me by surprise. I didn't expect any amp at this price point, let alone a Class D amplifier, to be capable of such exquisite musicality. Mated with a compatible speaker load, it is deserving of an enthusiastic endorsement. It will not be leaving my system any time soon. tas

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# Aesthetix Mimas Integrated Amplifier Redux

## Further Thoughts

Neil Gader

**I've been singing the praises of the Aesthetix Mimas** ever since its debut a few years ago. (My review appeared in Issue 294.) Twice awarded a Golden Ear by me, it is one of the top integrated amps on the market today and remains an absurdly good value, to boot. In standard factory trim, Mimas is a purist linestage—a dual-mono hybrid design coupled to a 150Wpc (8 ohms) output stage. Its chassis is a modular platform that allow owners to add features as they become available—essentially future-proofing their investment. At the time of the original review's publication, however, the rear bays of the Mimas were empty, as development of the modular dual-input mm/mc phono board and DAC card was still in the early stages. Ultimately, I did write about the excellent phono card in Issue 313. So, at this point Mimas really had nothing further to prove. But clearly founder/designer Jim White and the Aesthetix team did. When White notified me a few months later that the DAC card was available, we agreed that I still had unfinished business with Mimas

The $1250 DAC module sports fully balanced differential analog circuitry and utilizes WIMA film capacitors from Germany. It supports sampling rates up to 24-bit/192kHz (352.8kHz and 384kHz are USB only) and DSD64 (SPDIF and USB) and DSD128 (USB only). The USB section employs Wavelength Technologies' asynchronous implementation. In the words of Aesthetix founder and designer Jim White, "the Mimas DAC module is divided up into five main sections: control, USB, SPIDF, clocking, and DAC/analog, with each section using discrete power-supply regulation to isolate critical circuitry. An example: The D/A section has three separate power-supply regulation sections (one for digital, one for analog left, and one for analog right) with further power-supply isolation for critical sections provided by inductor/capacitor filter sections. In summary, there are 12 low-noise regulated power supplies in the module, each with multiple capacitors specifically intended to filter a wide range of frequencies and noise."

As delivered, standard digital inputs include a pair of RCA (coax), dual TosLink (optical), and USB. At the owner's request, BNC can be substituted. Operationally, Mimas is software driven. Once the DAC card is slotted in, it automatically activates the front-panel display to illuminate the new inputs: USB, 2x TosLink, and 2x coax. Because there is no direct selection of specific inputs, cycling forward or backward from one to another can be time consuming, but to speed things up, menu settings allow unused inputs to be deactivated.

Currently, my system operates via two digital sources, the Lumin S1 Media Player and the dCS Puccini disc player. For this review I employed both as transports to feed music to the Mimas DAC. However, to make a rough comparison between the Lumin's internal DAC and the Mimas DAC I needed to access the S1's digital output—a BNC-type. Not a problem for Aesthetix. At my request, the factory substituted a BNC coaxial input onto the card in place of one of the standard-issue RCA inputs. (BTW, a third source, my 4k Apple TV, is also connected to the DAC via a Wireworld Supernova 7 optical cable.)

No DAC review is complete without appropriate digital cabling, however. I began this evaluation by running the cable I had on hand—a stock, big-box-store BNC, which sounded faintly dull, dynamically anemic, and out of character compared with my previous experiences with Mimas. Coming to the rescue, Audience graciously supplied me with its top-tier frontRow BNC/SPDIF and SPDIF coaxial RCA cables. These were designed along the same lines using technologies similar to the frontRow interconnects and speaker cables I'd reviewed in Issue 328. I quickly found that not all BNC cables are created equally. Substituting Audience's frontRows was ear-opening. The Mimas sounded like itself again. Relieved, I listened to music as assorted as Gershwin, Van Halen, Norah Jones, and Louis Armstrong, and the Mimas' familiar bloom, transient attack, and dynamic gradients fell back in place. The difference between run-of-the-mill cable and the Audience was significant—to the point that taking them out of the system during this review would have been a disservice to the Aesthetix DAC.

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# Equipment Report Aesthetix Mimas Integrated Amplifier Redux

## Specs & Pricing

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In terms of sonics, Mimas DAC module couldn't have been more satisfying. Bass extension was excellent while upper-frequency transients and top-end harmonics were open and unconstricted. This was especially noteworthy when playing back brass, particularly trumpet, which to my mind should always have an element of bloom and warmth to temper its piercing power. Images were reproduced with superb clarity and rock-steady stability. Channel separation was excellent. This DAC nails instrumental texture and timbre with a realism that touches the romantic heart and the clinical ear in equal measures. Fingernails fanning across the strings of a flamenco guitar or the reedy nasality of a solo oboe, the weight of a bass violin bow digging into the low E string, the mingling of horsehair and rosin catching the strings.

On well-recorded classical recordings like those from Reference Recordings (try the Copland "Fanfare" or the Vaughn Williams *Wasps* Overture), a sense of the dimensionality of the soundstage and of orchestral layering was imparted with clarity and laser-like focus. I could sense the width of the stage from the outside edges of the violin section to the line of upstage double basses at the other side of the proscenium—and straight back from the conductor's podium, all the way to the percussion section. This level of clarity allowed me to orient myself as if I were sitting in the hall. For example, with a chamber quartet, not only could I distinguish the individual voicings of the violins, the viola, and cello, but I was also able to discern each performer's position on the stage.

As for dynamics, I fully expected lively pop and rock recordings to possess the requisite slam and concert-level power. No disappointment

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there. Clearly there was no denying the bottom-end extension and pitch accuracy, elements that are hallmarks of good digital. But recall that the rub against first-gen DACs was not so much "macro" performance but rather the loss of low-level information, the failure to refine and fully resolve inner details, including acoustic/ambient cues and reverberant fields. I customarily use concert grand piano to act as the final arbiter of these harmonically complex, low-level attributes—most commonly something by Keith Jarrett or pianist Evgeny Kissin's performance of Glinka's *The Lark* or Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. I listen for the weight and lightness of the player's touch on the keys, the note-to-note clarity and intensity of arpeggios, the soundboard radiating power, and the duration of decay. This was the area where the Mimas DAC most narrowly closed the gap on the Lumin S1. The S1 still had an edge in terms of sensitivity to minutiae, but for Mimas, an impressive "mission accomplished" moment, nonetheless.

Identifying the character or specific voice of the DAC was a challenge—made more so given the fact that this D/A can only be heard through the highly resolved lens of the Mimas electronics. What the DAC would sound like in another chain of electronics can't be answered here. However, since I had the Lumin S1 Media Player on hand, I did a rough comparison. Using the Lumin's analog output through Audience frontRow interconnects, I fully expected the Aesthetix to give the more costly S1 a run for the money, and it was indeed a contest. The Lumin cast a slightly warmer glow over the music and prevailed slightly in areas of dimensionality and imaging. The Aesthetix DAC tended to sound a shade cooler in comparison and a bit crisper on transients—drum kits, for example—but also just a bit flatter in soundstage depth.

The Aesthetix Mimas gives the lie to the notion that only dedicated separate components can offer stellar levels of transparency and resolution. However, beyond its enthusiastic musicality, the brilliance of Mimas' modular design is its ability to grow with the changing desires of its users. Should you want to begin spinning vinyl or improve and expand your digital audio options or both, Mimas will be there. And consider this, during the time I've spent with Mimas, Aesthetix added both phonostage and DAC capability without taking up a single additional square inch of my precious rack space or listening-room real estate. Enthusiasts in smaller rooms, take note.

From Day One, Mimas became one of the high-end's top integrated amps. And then it got better. And now, better still. I know that I'm restating the obvious when I say that the Aesthetix Mimas is what high-end audio is all about to me. A triumph. tas

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# Canor Audio AI 1.10 Integrated Amplifier

## Superlative Integrated

Dick Olsher

**Meet one of Slovakia's best kept secrets. I was surprised** to discover that tube specialist Canor Audio has been developing and manufacturing high-end audio products for nearly 25 years. In case you're wondering, the name comes from the Latin for "song" or "tune." The emphasis is on manufacturing user-friendly and aesthetically pleasing audio components. The Canor AI 1.10 integrated amplifier is a prime example of that. Superficially, it appears to be yet another routine push-pull amp, generating 40Wpc in ultralinear mode from a pair of KT88 beam tetrodes. But there's more to it than meets the eye.

For starters, the amp operates in a pure Class A and features an autobias circuit. Canor does *not* design products around off-the-shelf output transformers. Instead, output trannies are designed in-house for each specific application and are then manufactured by specialized vendors. The end product uses a Permalloy core and bifilar windings, both very desirable design attributes. Its weight of nearly 60 pounds is a testament to the serious amount of iron used here. Canor is proud of its proprietary CMT (compression-mount technology) PCB milling technology, which minimizes dielectric loss factors and is said to match the performance of point-to-point wiring but in a reproducible geometry.

Should you wish for more power, it is possible to double the output to 80Wpc by connecting a pair of amps as monoblocks. In monoblock mode, two amps are connected via a C-link bus line using a special cable (provided by Canor). One of the amplifiers becomes a "primary" and the other a "secondary" with volume control and input selection being transmitted synchronously. This lowers distortion and activates the XLR input on the back panel for fully balanced operation.

The audio circuit uses common twin triodes; a 12AX7 for voltage gain, followed by a 12AT7 configured as a phase-splitter. Although located a three-hour drive from the JJ Electronic tube factory, Canor opted to use Russian Electro-Harmonix KT88s. Of all beam power tubes, the KT88 has earned the distinction over the years of being capable of supreme musicality. Of course, much depends on execution, but at its best it can deliver exceptional clarity and soundstage transparency. And it seems to me that the Canor team has done its best to give the KT88 full scope of expression to deliver its full sonic promise via excellent output iron and a well-filtered power supply.

To protect the power tube complement, both warm-up and cool-down cycles are used. The cool-down cycle may sound a bit odd, but its main reason is to avoid the possibility of a user turning

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## Specs & Pricing

**Output power:** 2x 40W/4 and 8 ohms (ultralinear mode); 2x 20W/4 and 8 ohms (triode mode)
**Inputs sensitivity:** 500mV
**Inputs:** 5x unbalanced, 2x balanced
**Frequency response:** 10–50,000Hz (±0.5dB/5W)
**Input impedance:** 30k Ohms
**Harmonic distortion:** <0.05%/1kHz at 5W
**Signal-to-noise ratio:** >95dB
**Damping factor:** 9 (4-ohm load); 10.5 (8-ohm load)
**Power dissipation:** 220W
**Tube complement:** 1x 12AX7, 2x 12AT7, 4x KT88
**Dimensions:** 435 x 170 x 485 mm
**Weight:** 26kg (net)
**Price:** $6999

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080 06 Prešov
Slovakia

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**Associated Equipment**
**Speakers:** Fleetwood Sound Company DeVille, QUAD ESL-57, Rogers LS3/5A SE
**Phono front end:** Kuzma Reference turntable, Kuzma Stogi Reference 313 VTA tonearm, Clearaudio daVinci V2 MC Phono Cartridge; Wright Sound WPP200C phono stage; Sound Tradition MC-10 step-up transformer
**Digital front end:** Audirvana 3.5 software; Qobuz Streaming; Denafrips Terminator DAC; Alldaq ADQ-USB 3.0 isolator
**Cable & interconnects:** Acrotec, Mogami & Kimber KCAG interconnects; Acrotec 6N; Kimber KCAG, ChromaLeaf Canare 4S11, Analysis Plus Oval 12, & Take Five Audio Cryo treated Mogami 3103 speaker cable
**Accessories:** Sound Application CF-X & TT-7 power line conditioners

on the amp quickly after it's switched off, which would stress the tubes and shorten their lifetime. A warm-up delay is set to allow the operating voltages to stabilize prior to making music. Note that all tubes undergo a critical selection process, which includes burn-in and precision measurements, to ensure long-life and stable operation.

The front panel is dominated by a relay-controlled stepped attenuator capable of 1dB resolution to a minimum setting of -63dB. The attenuator was revamped for use in the AI 1.10 to provide two independent blocks for each channel to improve channel separation and minimize the number of contacts through which the signal passes. Input and volume selections are displayed prominently on the front panel. There is no balance control, but a nifty little remote control duplicates the front panel controls except for the ultralinear/triode switch.

Ultralinear/triode (UL/TR) switching is performed by means of a relay and can be performed live. It was David Manley at VTL who popularized this function in the 1980s, and it has by now become a standard feature in UL amplifiers. It certainly has its merits. It's like having two amps in one. Flexibility is a good thing. The distortion spectra are different enough to often yield a clear preference for one mode with a particular speaker load. One practical problem with this scheme revolves around optimizing the output transformer's primary impedance to serve the needs of both modes.

I took the time to explore the sonics of both modes in the company of the Fleetwood Sound Company DeVille with its totally benign 8-ohm nominal impedance magnitude. TR mode impressed initially with sweeter and smoother textures and seemed a perfect match for Mozart violin concertos. Wind forward a bit, and it became clear that UL mode was better balanced tonally, with its tonal center of gravity being squarely in the orchestral power range, that is the lower midrange. For someone like me, addicted to the big tone sound of 6SN7 octals, UL was the way to go. Then there was also the issue of microdynamic shadings, UL mode having the upper hand.

Let's get to the meat of it. The first and lasting impression was of exceptional soundstage transparency combined with transient clarity. It was so easy to peer into the depths of the soundstage and localize individual instruments. Resolution of low-level detail was as good as it gets for any tube amp at this or any price point. Detail seemed to emerge from a low noise floor and bubble to the surface without artificial enhancement such as treble emphasis. In fact, the Canor insisted on tonal neutrality, refusing to editorialize and simply staying responsive to each recording's intrinsic balance. These attributes made reproduction of live recordings especially memorable, enhancing the illusion of being there, a prime example being Leonard Cohen's *Live in London*. Just an amazing performance for a 73-year-old musician. His poetic vision and emotional intonation came through in spades. The crowd chatter was supremely well resolved and helped pull me into the recording's acoustic.

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> *Robert Harley, Editor in Chief, The Absolute Sound, June 2022*

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I thought it would be reasonable to introduce the Canor to the QUAD-57 ESL, since low-power tube amps are often touted as a good match for the QUADs. Actually, I was recently partially disabused of that notion after I auditioned the 47 Laboratory 4717 Shigaraki. This coupling offered a superbly expressive midrange and excellent treble extension. To its credit, the Canor sounded better than my Will Vincent Dynaco ST-70, but it was clear that it was struggling at the frequency extremes. That's not surprising in view of the QUAD's 30-ohm max bass impedance and 2-ohm minimum treble impedance. I tried both the 4- and 8-ohm taps and settled on the 4-ohm as offering the most natural tonality and better bass control. But the end result still fell short of the 47 Lab amplifier's magic. This experience highlighted the need to take care in optimizing the amp/speaker interface.

Next up for the Canor was the Rogers LS3/5A 15-ohm Special Edition mini-monitor loudspeaker perched on its matching Panzerholz stands. These puppies are a true 15-ohm nominal load with about a 12-ohm minimum. Not only is this an easy load for a tube amp, but the Rogers also features a fairly flat impedance magnitude from 1.5kHz to 20kHz, thereby minimizing tube amp load interactions and ensuring tonal accuracy through the upper mids and treble range. With the 8-ohm taps, it seemed that I finally found a home for the TR mode. The mids were pure and sweet sounding, and the upper octaves were naturally voiced. It seemed the perfect setup for Baroque music. Returning to one of my favorites, the Corelli Concerti Grossi Op 6/7–12 (Nicholas McGegan and the Philharmonia Baroque orchestra), proved to be a joyous experience. The Rogers is one of the most cohesive two-way designs money can buy, and it can weave a compelling siren song. But at a sensitivity of 82.5dB, it did need more power than TR mode was capable of; so, reluctantly, I switched back to UL mode, which was slightly less sweet sounding but dynamically much more authoritative. Listening late into the night, I began to get a strong impression that the Canor was bringing out the best in the Rogers: lucid and detailed mids, and a cohesive well-fleshed out soundstage that was so easy to get lost in. This coupling did justice to harmonic textures, conjuring a sensual musical tapestry that kept me glued to my listening seat.

On all counts, the Canor AI 1.10 is a superlative integrated amp. It is built to last, and its intelligent warm-up and cool-down cycles will keep the tube complement going strong for years to come. It brings to life the venerable KT88's full sonic potential. Transient clarity and soundstage transparency are its calling cards, attributes that should make music lovers content for a lifetime. An enthusiastic two-thumbs-up recommendation! tas

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Allan Moulton reviews the Alumine Three, The Absolute Sound, Issue 304

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# Gradient 1.4 Loudspeaker

## A Unique Approach

Robert E. Greene

**From the very beginning, back in** 1984, when Jorma Salmi founded Gradient jointly with Jouko Alanko and Mikko Paloranta, Salmi's speaker designs for Gradient reflected unusually careful thought about the basic questions of how the speaker would interact with the room around it. Of course, any speaker designer has to face this question *de facto*. But Salmi was exceptional in the extent to which he dealt with the question overtly, and how successfully he did so. The Gradient 1.4 is, unfortunately, the last design from Gradient involving Jorma Salmi: He died in May of 2018 (theabsolutesound.com/articles/jorma-salmi-1948-2018-1/). The design of the Gradient 1.4 was completed by his son Atte Salmi, who is in charge of Gradient in both the business and design aspects, and with whom Jorma was working closely before his sudden death.

Thus, the 1.4 is the end of an era for Gradient, but it is also a demonstration that Gradient will continue along its historical paths of producing speakers which address the fundamentals of speaker design with real profundity. It is a really good speaker, but it is more than just good. It presents a new way of thinking about how a speaker can work in a room. The result is sonically different from conventional floorstanding speakers, different in a way that I shall try to make precise. One might well argue that it is better than the conventional approach in certain fundamental regards, but the essential thing is to understand how it sounds. I shall then leave it to you to decide if that is better from your viewpoint.

### What is Unique about the Gradient 1.4

The Gradient 1.4 has a floor-firing bass driver that is omnidirectional horizontally, but has overall half-space directivity on account of being floor-firing. Above the crossover point at 200Hz, it radiates primarily forward. I do not mean here "forward" in the conventional sense that the drivers are in a box and the drivers face forward. Usually, speakers which are forward-firing in that sense actually radiate a lot of sound backwards, in most cases up to quite high frequencies. The sound bends around the cabinet and a lot of it comes out as "back wave." If you take a speaker like that out of doors and walk around behind it, you will still hear a lot of sound and not just in the bass. The really high frequencies are not radiated backwards very much, but quite a lot comes back in the midrange. In the 1.4, the response from behind is down at least 5dB from 200Hz on up, and above 2kHz it is down 10dB or more. In fact, only in the octave from 800Hz to 1.5kHz is it less than 10 dB down. Over most of the range from 200Hz up, the back wave is rather low in intensity. In particular back radiation is all but gone from around 300Hz to 500Hz, a range where conventional forward-firing boxes would be putting out a lot of backwards energy.

This behavior is generated by the use of what is known as an aperiodic-venting or flow-resistance enclosure. The back wave of the midrange driver is vented out the back via a port filled with damping material, which delays the back wave the right amount to cancel, to a great extent, the front wave coming around the cabinet. (The high frequencies do not diffract around the cabinet and the speaker radiates primarily forward on that account, as is true for most speakers above the "baffle step.") This idea was used in early Gradient designs. The Revolution also seriously attenuated the back wave via a similar method. Also, like the Revolution, the 1.4 uses a midrange driver with a concentrically mounted tweeter. The effect is that the speaker generates sound above 200Hz that comes from a single point but radiates essentially only forward.

### Why the Gradients Sound Different

Back in the early days of *The Absolute Sound*, the idea arose of making speakers create a "soundstage" by *not* toeing them in but by aiming them down the room, with their main radiating axis parallel to the sidewalls and with the speakers fairly close to the sidewalls. While HP would occasionally deny that he wanted to use the sound off the walls, *de facto* this scheme was definitely using sound reflected off the sidewalls to create a sense of space. This was formalized by studies from F. Toole and others of

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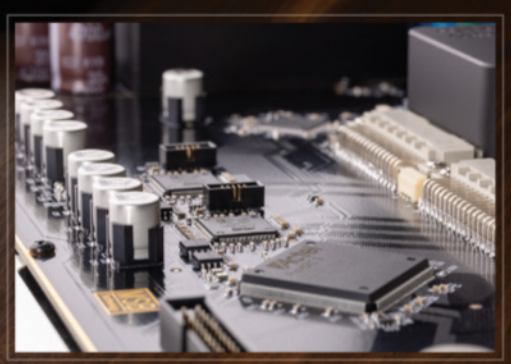

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when the early sidewall reflections could be used to enhance "spaciousness" without altering timbre significantly. And the Archimedes/Eureka project conducted jointly by KEF, Bang & Olufsen, and the Technical University of Denmark studied how strong various early reflections could be without altering timbre. This study showed that minimizing the floor reflection was crucial for preserving timbre—more on this point later.

Gradient from the start pursued the idea of minimizing early reflections. In the Gradient 1.3s (which I reviewed in TAS in 1992), the floor-firing woofer was combined with an upward-tilted dipole mid-driver and a tweeter array that was vertically directional, to give almost nothing off the floor for a long time (the bass off the floor was part of the direct arrival since the woofer was floor-firing). And with the proper setup, very little midrange energy came off the sidewalls because of the large dipole midrange driver, which could have its acoustic null aimed at the first reflection point off the adjacent sidewall. I still have a pair of Gradient 1.3s. Listening to them remains a startling experience.

Later, Gradient backed off this quasi-anechoic approach. The 1.4s have the same kind of floor-firing woofer arrangement, but while the midrange has some directionality, it has its back wave attenuated in the fashion already described, and also has a moderately wide dispersion. But not extremely wide. It is pretty well down in level from 800Hz on up, beyond 60 degrees off-axis.

On the other hand, the flattest response is actually at about 20 degrees off the geometric axis. What does this add up to? Suppose you toe in the speakers or over-toe them, and also tilt the spherical top unit (which is rotatable) up some, so that you are on the flattest response axis. If you do this just right, then practically nothing is coming off the sidewalls from 800Hz up. And very little is coming off the floor, either.

The sonic result of this is striking. You can then hear into the recorded venue to a truly unusual extent. The sense of your own listening room around you is minimized to an extreme. At this point, you will either be very enthusiastic about the speakers, as I was and am, or you will need some getting used to the sound. This is not what you hear from the average quasi-wide-pattern, narrow-front floorstander. I cannot promise you that you will like this, but I can promise you that I did! And I can surely promise you that you will hear the difference.

The near elimination of floor bounce, in particular, is really important. As the Archimedes/Eureka project showed, floor bounce is a major source of speaker coloration in rooms. Getting rid of it is a big step in the right direction.

One of the things that arises from this is that the Gradient 1.4s considerably reduce the sense of the place of the speakers being a boundary of the sonic image. The position front to back of the recorded sound sources is much more dependent on what is on the recording and less dependent than usual on the position of the speakers. Everyone expects speakers to vanish in the side-to-side sense, and the 1.4s do this extremely well. But you will likely be surprised—and you should be pleased—at the extent to which they vanish front-to-back, as well. Many years ago, Gunther Thiele argued convincingly that the tendency of stereo to locate the front of the soundstage in the plane of the speakers was a serious defect. This is related to floor bounce, which tells the ear/brain where the speakers are front to back. In theoretical stereo, the front-to-back position of sources is determined by where the source was, not by where the speakers are. To a surprising extent, this fault of stereo localization, of making front to back dependent on the distance to the speakers, is minimized, as one might expect from the reduced floor bounce.

It all adds up to something unusual and something unusually good in terms of the spatial character of the sound. This characteristic of the 1.4s may well sweep all else before it for some listeners. Reproducing the original venue and erasing your listening room acoustically is after all a major goal of audio. And here it happens to a remarkable extent.

### What the Gradient 1.4s Sound like Otherwise

Concentric mid/treble drivers have long been a source of fascination, going back to the days of the Tannoy Dual Concentric, decades ago. Gradient started using such drivers in the Revolution back in the 1990s. The 1.4s also use a concentric mid/treble driver, made by SEAS in Norway. Now, concentric drivers have clear advantages from the viewpoint of geometric naturalness, as it were. Stereo sound is supposed to come from point sources (or line sources). But in practice, it has proven hard to get such drivers absolutely as smooth and "flat" as separate midrange- and tweeter-driver setups on and near their best axis. The 1.4 concentric is quite smooth and well balanced as such drivers go. But it is not completely smooth and flat, having in particular some extra projection around 1kHz. This diminishes off the main axis. One can hear the change easily on pink noise through one speaker. And to get the 1.4s to sound completely natural on pink noise or, indeed, on music, one needs to pull down this 1kHz area a bit with equalization.

A few small irregularities happen above and below the 1kHz region, but these are comparatively inconsequential. And the rise on-axis up to near 20kHz, presumably due to the metal dome tweeter's resonance, goes away at the preferred, somewhat-off-axis position, the maximally flat position being something on the order of 15–20 degrees off-axis. This can be either horizontal or vertical or some combination of the two, since the round driver mounted in a spherical enclosure has behavior that is rotationally symmetrical around the main axis. So, with the slight EQ tweaking referred to, one can get very smooth response, Historically, Jormi Salmi was intent upon smooth pink noise response, and that is available here with the correction of the 1kHz region and very small tweaks otherwise.

Once this is arranged, the 1.4s are very close to neutral sounding, aided one supposes by the absence of reflection-induced colorations, especially from the floor. This all seems, no doubt, a little "techno-nerdy" in description. But the musical effect is conspicuous. You hear the timbre of each instrument as it was recorded with real truthfulness.

...J.Sikora delivers in spades.

—Jacob Heilbrunn *The Absolute Sound*, February 2022

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## Specs & Pricing

**Drivers:** 220mm long-throw woofer, 176mm pre-coated reed-paper cone midrange, coaxial Al/Mg 25mm dome tweeter
**Frequency response:** 45Hz–20kHz ±2dB, 27Hz -6dB
**Crossover frequencies:** 200Hz and 2.5kHz
**Impedance:** 4 ohms
**Sensitivity:** 87dB/2.83V/1m
**Recommended amplifier power:** 50–250W
**Dimensions:** 32 x 92 x 32cm
**Weight:** 15kg
**Price:** $7650

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The bass is extended for a speaker of this size, but tends to be slightly down in perceived level overall if the speakers are out in the room, where one usually places floorstanding speakers. One can experiment with placement closer to the corners, but toed-in. This avoids reflection off adjacent walls above the bass and lower midrange, since the speaker has essentially a cardioid pattern from there on up. Really close to the corners brings the bass up too much, in fact. But this can be adjusted by choosing just the right distance and/or pulling the bass down a bit with electronic bass correction. You can get the bass level you want with some experimenting.

Speakers with concentric drivers tend to sound somewhat subdued compared to wide-dispersion cones, because the mid-driver usually acts as a waveguide for the tweeter, and this gives a narrowed pattern in high frequencies. This narrower pattern makes the room sound have reduced energy in the higher frequencies compared to the wider angle lower down in frequency. The 1.4s are less extreme in this regard than some concentric mid/tweeter speakers, but the effect is still there. The 1.4s get really directional from about 2kHz up—hence the subdued sound. Switching over to wide-dispersion speakers will make this clear. This choice is an almost inevitable compromise: Wider pattern will make you pay the price of more early reflections in small rooms, where the distance to the sidewalls cannot be large; here, the controlled pattern offers a big advantage, and of course the reduced floor reflection is a big advantage in any room. The floor is always close by! But the subdued sound remains a feature of the situation. Of course, totally flat room response, flat power response all the way, is by consensus too bright on most recordings. Don Keele's CBT (constant beam-width transducer) speakers have an adjustment to turn the top end down for this reason. But the 1.4s narrow down fairly early.

### And, at Long Last, Music

Jorma Salmi was an ardent lover of music (he and I shared an affection for the music of Gabriel Fauré, a taste perhaps not common among technical audio people). For all the comprehensive technical analysis in Gradient designs, they are ultimately dedicated to presenting music. And so it is with the Gradient 1.4s.

Listening with the 1.4s to the Sicilienne of Maria Theresa von Paradis played by Arturo Delmoni and Meg Bachman Vas on *Songs My Mother Taught Me* [North Star/Mobile Fidelity MFCD877], I experienced one of those rare moments where reproduced music seemed to all but equal the beauty of the live experience. The purity of the sound (the 1.4s are very low in distortion), the uncolored tonal truth, the sense of not being jammed into one's own listening room but free in the original venue, all added up to what one is looking for in audio but seldom finds. And it is done without any DSP manipulation at all—this is a purely analog passive speaker.

On material for large ensemble, say the Dallas Symphony/Mata recording of Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances* [Proarte CD], an additional virtue was revealed—the ability of the 1.4s to unravel complex textures in dense sonic mixes. I once wrote of the Gradient 1.3s that they were the speakers to use if one needed to write down an orchestral score from listening. This is true of the 1.4s, as well. A kind of sonic fog that tends to envelope the lower mids and upper bass with most speakers is lifted. The suppression of the back wave in the 300Hz region seems to clear up the sound in this range, without taking any substantial toll on tonal character. Real transparency is in view. And on the Telarc Ravel-Borodin-Bizet CD *Bolero* [Cincinnati Pops, Eric Kunzel cond., Telarc-CD80703], the sense of the hall was exceptionally good, aided by this transparency in the lower frequencies.

Back to solo instrument, or small ensemble, with Freddy Kempf's Rachmaninoff on BIS and with Starker and Neriki's Schumann/Brahms/Rachmaninoff, the same naturalness of timbre, purity, and transparency in the lower parts of the piano and cello revealed how extraordinarily beautiful these recordings (and performances) are.

### Overall

Lines from Copland's "The Boatman's Dance" from *Old American Songs* come to my mind: "The boatman is a thrifty man; there's none can do what the boatman can."

The Gradient 1.4s are thrifty, indeed, in the realm of high-end prices. And there really are no other speakers that I know of that can do exactly what they do. Like their ancestors, the Gradient 1.3s, they present the sound of recordings in a unique way. They are available in the USA, but not very widely as yet. When shows resume, I hope many people will get to hear them. Meanwhile, if you are really serious about getting your room out of your system and hearing recordings as they actually are, the Gradient 1.4s are, in the words of the *Michelin Guides*, worth a journey. tas

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# ALL TRADES

## LUMIN P1 NETWORK PLAYER/PREAMPLIFIER AND L1 DISK DRIVE

BY ROBERT HARLEY PHOTOS BY MATT WRIGHT-STEEL

**IF YOU WANT** an example of how far music servers have advanced in the last ten years, look no further than Lumin's new P1 network player. The P1 offers a feature set precisely tailored to today's music systems, blurring the lines between traditional component categories. The product combines a network streamer and DAC along with extensive preamplifier functions, including ten digital and analog inputs, source switching, and volume control. It even has three HDMI inputs with 4k passthrough and ARC (Audio Return Channel) along with an HDMI output—important features if you use the P1 as part of a multimedia system. Add full MQA decoding and Roon Ready operation along with a sophisticated fully balanced DAC, and you have the makings of a serious product. The P1 doesn't include integral music storage, but you can add Lumin's L1, a small outboard hard-disk drive with either 2TB or 5TB of storage. The icing on the cake is the beautiful build-quality and elegant casework. Although not a budget product at $10,000, the P1 offers features and performance that many more expensive servers fail to deliver.

## Lumin P1 Network Player/Preamplifier and L1 Disk Drive

The Achilles' heel of DAC/preamplifiers has been the digital-domain volume control. These controls adjust the volume by performing mathematical computation on the audio samples, resulting in a loss of fidelity, particularly when the volume is decreased by more than a few dB. Lumin has overcome this shortcoming by licensing a novel digital-domain signal-processing algorithm and volume control that introduces no distortion or loss of resolution. Called Leedh, the technology was first used in the $72,000 Soulution 760 DAC enthusiastically reviewed by Jonathan Valin in Issue 311. I've broken out an explanation of Leedh in the sidebar.

The P1 has a full complement of digital inputs (see Specs & Pricing) along with one unbalanced analog input on RCA jacks and one balanced input on XLR jacks. Because the P1's volume control operates in the digital domain, analog input signals at one of the two analog inputs are digitized and then converted back to analog. The analog inputs can work in "theater pass-through" mode simply by setting the volume control as fixed rather than variable, or with the volume setting at 100. This sets the P1's gain at a fixed level so that your AV receiver or multichannel controller sets the volume of each channel in the multichannel system. Without this feature you'd need to adjust the P1's volume every time you changed the volume on the AVR or multichannel controller to maintain correct balance between the left/right channels and the other speakers in a multichannel speaker array. If you use only your stereo speakers to reproduce TV sound (no multichannel controller or multichannel speakers), the P1 has you covered. With three HDMI inputs and one HDMI output (all 4k-compatible), you simply connect all your video sources (Blu-ray player, streaming box such as Roku, cable box, etc.) to the P1 and run an HDMI cable from the P1's HDMI output to your TV.

The P1's analog output can be connected directly to a power amplifier via the unbalanced RCA jacks or the balanced XLR output connectors. Because the P1's DAC and output stage are truly balanced circuits, a balanced connection to your power amplifier is recommended if your amp has balanced inputs.

An unusual feature is a fiber-optic network input that's included in addition to the conventional RJ45 Ethernet jack. This optical input allows you to use an outboard switch that has a fiber-optic output to connect the P1 to the network, isolating the P1 from noise on the Ethernet line. I bought a TP-Link MC 220L Ethernet-to-fiber-optic converter and TP-Link TL-SM5520 fiber-optical cable to try this feature of the P1. The pair cost $40.97 with tax. This is my first experience with fiber-optic networking, which some listeners find to be an improvement over copper-wired Ethernet because of the galvanic isolation of the server from the Ethernet line.

The P1 can be controlled by the free Lumin app or by Roon, the subscription-based music-management software. The Lumin app combines control features specific to Lumin products, such as source switching and volume control along with full music-management with integration of streaming services (Spotify, Tidal, Qobuz, TuneIn) and music stored on a NAS (network-attached storage) drive. A beautifully made remote control fashioned from zinc and acrylic is included for those who prefer a hand-held wand to a phone or tablet.

The chassis work and build-quality merit special mention, particularly in a product of this price. The curved and swept-back front panel is machined from aluminum billet, and the way the front panel attaches to the case gives the impression of a monolithic block. The display is deeply inset into the front panel, again conferring a sense of heft and solidity. It's no coincidence that Lumin is part of a large electronics company, Pixel Magic in Hong Kong, that builds set-top boxes and professional broadcast products; the company brings to the table a high level of in-house industrial design and manufacturing expertise.

As previously mentioned, the P1 has no integral music storage. For that, you'll need the L1, an outboard hard-disk drive in an aluminum chassis. Lumin believes that including a hard-disk drive within the same chassis as the server and DAC circuits compromises sound quality, which is why it offers storage only in outboard drives. Plus, the P1's cost is kept lower for those users who stream music exclusively. The L1 is available in two capacities, 2TB ($1200) and 5TB ($1700). Although the L1 is more expensive than buying your own generic drive, the L1 incorporates a bit of software that makes it much easier to set up

**JONES' VOICE BECAME MORE IMMEDIATE AND PALPABLE, WITH A HUMAN QUALITY MISSING FROM THE MECHANICAL RENDERING I HEARD WITH CONVENTIONAL DIGITAL-DOMAIN ATTENUATION**

and configure than an off-the-shelf generic drive. In addition, buying the L1 gets you the customer support from your dealer and Lumin. I simply connected the L1 to my PC via a USB cable, dragged some music files to it, disconnected it from the computer, and attached it to the network. My music library immediately appeared in the Lumin app. I've never had an easier experience setting up a music server. Note, however, that music files on the L1 won't appear on Roon because Roon doesn't support UPnP devices.

The closer you look at the P1 the more impressive its design appears. The power supply features dual toroidal transformers housed in an isolated chamber within the chassis. The P1's clock is the same as that developed for Lumin's flagship X1 streamer. It is based on dual "Femto" oscillators and uses an FPGA (field-programmable gate array) to distribute the clock. The DAC section is truly balanced, with one DAC per phase of the balanced signal. This method is far better—and more expensive—than creating a "balanced" output signal with a phase splitter after an unbalanced single-DAC stage. High-quality ESS ES9028PRO SABRE DAC chips perform the conversion to analog. The balanced DAC output is buffered with dual Lundahl output transformers. Lundahl has been making a wide variety of transformers for professional and consumer audio since 1958. These expensive devices are found in the world's finest microphones and other pro-audio products. The P1's output stage is identical to that in the company's X1 flagship, but the P1 is built around the ESS ES-9028PRO DAC rather than the X1's higher-grade ES9038PRO DAC. Overall, the power supply design, clocking, balanced DAC section, and transformer-coupled output stage suggest that sound quality was a paramount consideration in the design, not an afterthought.

The Lumin app offers a wide range of customization options including how the music-management system displays music, whether a single tap or double tap starts a track playing, and the graphic presentation of music and playlists, for just a few examples. It also provides access to a wealth of features including upsampling options, polarity inversion, DSD-to-PCM and PCM-to-DSD conversion, and a channel-balance control. The app is not as graphically compelling as Roon, nor is it as easy to navigate and manage a music library. That could be, however, simply familiarity: I used the Lumin app for just a few weeks during the review, but I've been using Roon nearly daily for years. Unlike Roon, the Lumin app doesn't auto-fill the artist's name when searching. When an artist does appear after a search, the app offers you the choice of the artist in general, a playlist by that artist, or a single track. If you want the artist's discography, you have to tap the "Artist" icon, and then tap it again to select the discography rather than albums on which the artist played or collaborated with another musician. I found this process more time consuming than Roon's direct approach. Tapping a circle in the top right corner brings up a volume control, with the number inside the circle indicating the volume level. I like that the

**THE P1 HAD A REFINED AND SOPHISTICATED SOUND THAT WAS MORE IN LINE WITH DACS AND SERVERS COSTING MUCH MORE.**

## Lumin P1 Network Player/Preamplifier and L1 Disk Drive

app shows the digital format including sample frequency, bit depth, and data rate. This information is also displayed on the P1's front panel along with artist and track names.

### LISTENING

As I mentioned, setting up the P1/L1 was extremely simple and glitch-free. After letting the unit settle in for a few days, I began experimenting to find the P1's optimum settings, explore Leedh processing, and evaluate the Lumin app with a sonic comparison to Roon. I wanted to find the optimum configuration before critical listening sessions. It is easy to turn Leedh on and off in the app to compare it to a conventional digital-domain volume control, as well as to no volume control. When the volume is set at "100" or the output level is set to "fixed," both Leedh and the conventional volume controls are bypassed.

When I applied 30dB of attenuation with the conventional volume control, an entire level of low-level detail was shaved off. There was simply less musical information there, from quiet sounds at the back of the mix to the inner detail of instrumental timbre. Percussion instruments sounded like nothing more than transient clicks, the mechanism by which the sound was created was lost. On Norah Jones' debut album, her voice was harder and a bit coarse with the conventional volume control, and was overlaid with a roughness and stridency, particularly on louder passage in the higher end of her register. When I switched to the same amount of attenuation with Leedh, the sound became more liquid and refined overall, with the low-level detail restored. The bite on the leading edge of the guitar was gone, replaced by a more natural rendering of the instrument's attacks and dynamics. With Leedh, Jones' voice became more immediate and palpable, with a human quality missing from the mechanical rendering I heard with conventional digital-domain attenuation. Finally, unlike the conventional volume control that flattened the soundstage and reduced the sense of air, Leedh maintained the presentation's three-dimensionality and bloom.

I then compared 30dB of Leedh attenuation with no attenuation by making up the volume difference with the CH Precision L10 preamplifier. To my surprise, I heard no degradation with Leedh; the two presentations sounded identical (the L10 was in the signal path for both presentations). It was clearly obvious that this amount of attenuation in a conventional digital volume control was a non-starter sonically, and that Leedh is sonically "lossless," as the company claims. This is, to say the least, a significant achievement.

Next, I compared the sound quality of Roon to the Lumin app. Much to my surprise, the Lumin app sounded better. Bass reproduction through the Lumin app was tauter, punchier, and better resolved. I could more easily hear the starts and stops of each note, as well as pitch definition. This greater resolution of dynamics, as well as the leaner and tighter rendering, gave music a more propulsive and upbeat quality compared with Roon. The Lumin app also had a more open and transparent top end with a greater sense of air and bloom. I was surprised by this result because I've used Roon with several other music servers, including the absolute state of the art, the Wadax Reference Server and Reference DAC. That said, however, Roon has a much better interface and features, and Roon's powerful tools for discovering new artists and music are unparalleled. I wouldn't draw any blanket conclusions from this single example.

I auditioned the P1 with its output feeding the CH Precision L10 four-chassis linestage, and with the P1 connected directly to the CH Precision M10 amplifiers without the linestage in the signal path. Considering the P1's extensive preamp capabilities, I suspect that most users will drive a power amplifier di-

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*Houston, TX*

rectly. Fortunately, this turned out to be the best-sounding configuration, even though I typically applied 40–60dB of attenuation to realize a normal range of listening levels. When listening to a balanced analog source through the P1's analog input and no preamplifier, my system required a whopping 60–70dB of attenuation in the P1. Despite this large amount of attenuation, I heard no sonic degradation.

My last setup comparison was to try the fiber-optic network connection in place of wired Ethernet. Again, this made an improvement—the sound was more present, alive, and palpable; the soundstage was deeper with greater dimensionality; and interestingly, the bass was fuller and richer. Lumin cautioned me that the fiber-optic input needs a long time—many hundreds of hours—to break in and sound its best.

Finally, after much experimentation to find the P1's best configuration, I was confident that I was getting the best performance possible from the P1. That work paid off, because I discovered that the P1 is an absolutely wonderful sounding and highly musical server. Even under the microscope of reference-level CH Precision electronics, Wilson Chronosonic XVX loudspeakers, and top-of-the-line cables and power conditioning, the P1 proved itself where it matters—communicating the music. The P1 had a refined and sophisticated sound that was more in line with DACs and servers costing much more. Many products at this price have a bit of hardness in their rendering of timbre, a metallic sheen over the treble, a loss of low-level detail, and a flattening of the soundstage into something less than a convincing illusion of three-dimensional space. But the P1 had a surprisingly liquid and engaging reproduction of instrumental texture and tone color. Dexter Gordon's wonderfully recorded (and beautifully played) tenor on the ballad "I Guess I'll Hang My Tears Out to Dry" [192/24 Qobuz] had a roundness, liquidity, and warmth that movingly conveyed his powerful and rich tone while also communicating Gordon's delicate and expressive phrasing. I also heard a halo of ambience around his horn, a halo that expanded with the dynamics of each note—a phenomenon Jonathan Valin has dubbed "action." Incidentally, I usually listen to this record (*Go*) as a 45rpm Music Matters release played on a $127k Basis Transcendence turntable—a tough act to follow. Nonetheless, the P1 had the warmth, richness of tone color, freedom from grain, and three-dimensionality of a much more expensive product.

I heard this liquidity of timbre and lack of hardness across a wide range of vocals as well; they had a distinct sense of presence without sounding

## SPECS & PRICING

**Type:** Network music server and preamplifier
**Digital inputs:** 1x coaxial on RCA, 1x AES/EBU, 1x TosLink optical, 3x HDMI, 1x USB, 1x Gigabit Ethernet (RJ45), 1x fiber network, 1x non-audio USB (for firmware upgrades)
**Digital outputs:** 1x HDMI passthrough, 1x coaxial on BNC jack, 1x USB audio
**Analog inputs:** 1x unbalanced on RCA, 1x balanced on XLR; theater pass-through option
**Analog outputs:** 1x unbalanced on RCA, 1x balanced on XLR
**Formats supported:** Up to 192kHz/24 bit and DoP to DSD64 on AES/EBU and coaxial; up to DSD512 and PCM 384/32 on USB
**Digital processing:** Leedh
**Features:** Full MQA decoding, Roon Ready
**Dimensions:** 350mm x 380mm x 107mm
**Weight:** 26.4 lbs
**Price:** $10,000

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**Associated Equipment**
**Loudspeakers:** Wilson Audio Chronosonic XVX, Wilson Audio Sub-Sonic subwoofers (x2), Wilson Audio ActivXO crossover
**Analog source:** Basis Audio A.J. Conti Transcendence turntable with SuperArm 12.5 tonearm; Air Tight Opus cartridge; CH Precision P1 phonostage with X1 power supply; DS Audio ST-50 stylus cleaner, Levin record brush, Degritter ultrasonic LP cleaner
**Amplification:** CH Precision L10 Dual Monaural linestage; CH Precision M10 Dual Monaural power amplifiers
**AC Power:** Shunyata Everest 8000 conditioner, Omega and Sigma NR V2 power cords; Shunyata AC outlets, five dedicated 20A lines wired with identical length 10AWG
**Support:** Critical Mass Systems Olympus equipment racks and Olympus amplifier stands; CenterStage² isolation, Arya Audio RevOpods isolation, Wilson Audio Pedestal
**Cables:** AudioQuest Dragon balanced interconnects, AudioQuest Dragon Zero and Dragon Bass loudspeaker cables
**Accessories:** The Chord Company GroundARAY noise reduction
**Acoustics:** Acoustic Geometry Pro Room Pack 12, ASC 16" Round Tube Traps
**Room:** Purpose-built; Acoustic Sciences Corporation Iso-Wall System

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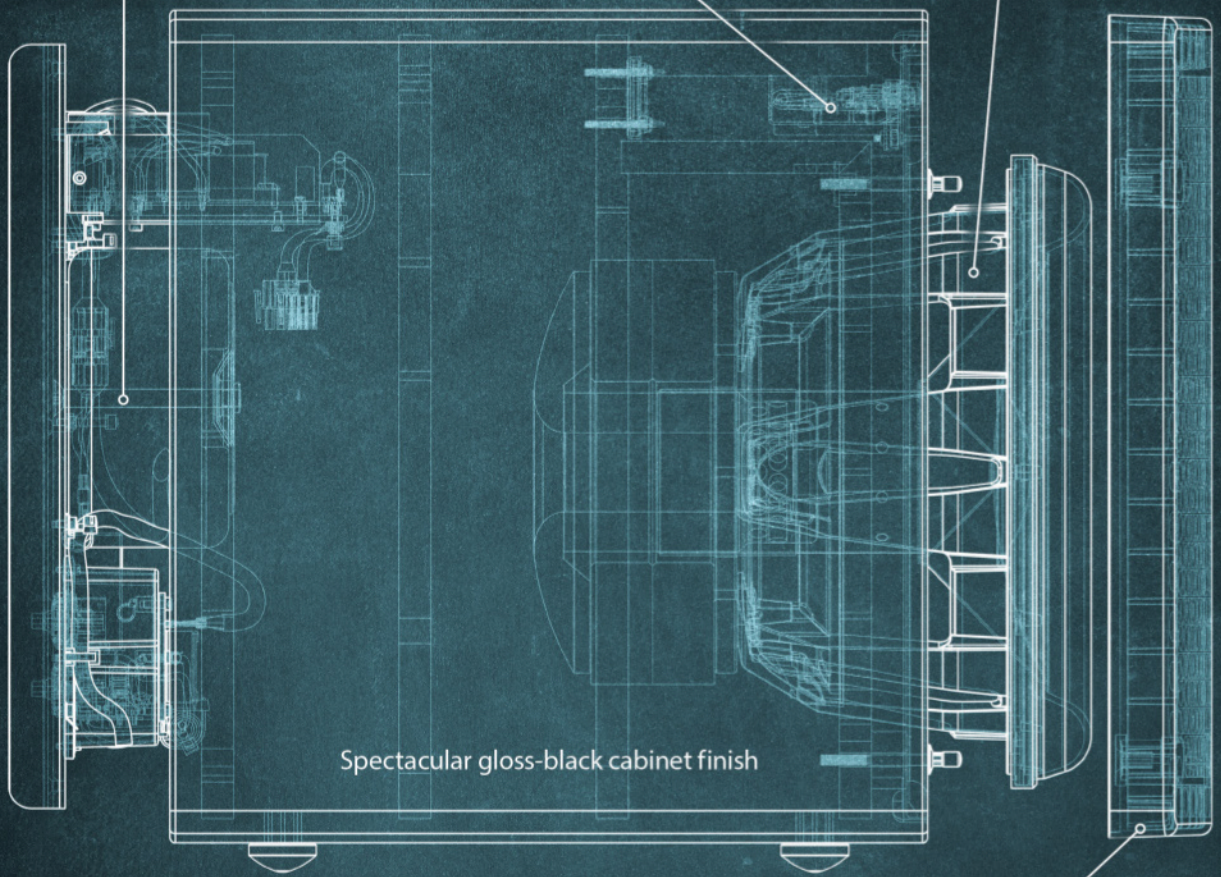

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forward. I really enjoyed the relaxed and natural quality to vocals that encouraged higher playback levels and "leaning in" to the performance rather than tightening up from feeling assaulted. The P1 rendered the human voice in a remarkably natural way rather than sounding slightly synthetic or artificial. A few nights ago, I was making dinner with the nearby listening-room door open and Diana Krall's outstanding album *Live in Paris* playing inside the room. Even from another space, listening as background, I could hear the P1's utter naturalness on her vocals—a decidedly human quality—that few components of any price get right. I had to revisit this album later that night if only to hear, with my full attention, her definitive interpretation of Joni Mitchell's "A Case of You." If you judge a component by how powerfully it communicates the expression of the lyrics and the singer, then the P1 is outstanding by any measure. I attribute this reaction to the P1's lack of glare and grain in the midrange, its treble smoothness, and overall sophisticated and refined sound that emphasizes musical values rather than hi-fi fireworks.

Although this sounds like it could be a recipe for bland politeness, the P1 is one of the more dynamically thrilling and rhythmically propulsive DACs I've heard. Lots of DACs have dynamic punch and transient speed, but the difference is that the P1's leading-edge transients aren't accompanied by etch and hardness. The P1 has fabulous snap and speed, but not in a way that makes you wince. The pop of a snare drum was much more nuanced and textured than what I usually hear from digital; rather than sounding like a burst of white noise, the lower-frequency components of the drum that gives the instrument body and weight were also thrillingly conveyed. I also heard this same sense of body on acoustic guitar; the rich resonance of the instrument wasn't overlaid by an overly aggressive and steely attack of the strings. As a result of the P1's speed and dynamic prowess, coupled with a relaxed and intimate character, I found myself quickly immersed in the music in every listening session. This isn't to say that the P1 blunts high-frequency transients or sounds closed-in through the upper octaves. The P1 had a full measure of treble energy, life, and top-octave air, but that energy had a pristine clarity free from grain and grunge.

Soundstage depth and three-dimensionality were similarly impressive. The Eric Clapton/B.B. King album *Riding with the King* [Tidal MQA] sounds like it was recorded live in the studio, with lots of leakage between microphones that almost give the album the feel of a live performance. Steve Gadd's drum kit was centered way in the back, with palpable air between him and the lead performers. When Clapton's voice enters, it was startling in its immediacy and palpable loca-

tion within the recorded acoustic. I heard the P1's ability to present an expansive and realistic sense of space on *Pictures at an Exhibition* on Reference Recordings, particularly the way the lead tuba part on "Bydlo," which is set back in the soundstage, illuminates the hall's acoustics.

The P1's bass was well defined and had plenty of weight and heft in the bottom octave. The presentation was firmly anchored, tonally and rhythmically. The bass was nicely textured as well, with a warmth and density of tone color.

Some audio components have a kind of ineffable magic that transcends "good sound" and enters the realm of communicating the music in a more powerful and involving way. This quality is hard to pin down to any one sonic criterion, or even combination of sonic attributes, but it's unmistakable when you hear it. It is likely the result of an absence of sonic artifacts; your brain's processing power is devoted to fully experiencing the musical expression rather than to mentally correcting the sonic flaws. The catch-all term "musicality" is perhaps the best descriptor of this elusive aspect of music reproduction. Whatever you want to call it, the P1 possesses this quality, delivering an experience that is musically authentic and immersive.

## CONCLUSION

The Lumin P1 network player is a standout in so many ways. Its feature set, which combines network streaming, a high-quality DAC, and a multi-input preamplifier, is perfectly suited to today's music systems. With full MQA decoding and Roon-Ready status, the P1 leaves no important item off the table.

Beyond these capabilities, however, the P1 solves a fundamental problem with digital-domain preamplifiers—the distortion introduced by their volume controls. By incorporating the sophisticated Leedh volume-control processing in the P1, Lumin has overcome this previously intractable limitation. It's important to note that the P1 delivered the musical performance I've described when I was driving the power amplifiers directly via Leedh with typically 35–50dB of attenuation—a remarkable result that would be impossible with a conventional digital volume control.

But the real star of the show is the sound quality of the P1's DAC. When ideally configured, the P1 is not just capable of good sound, but also of a powerful and immersive musical experience. This is a great-sounding DAC, and one that would have received my enthusiastic recommendation if it were simply a bare-bones $10k DAC. The P1 is so good that it will benefit greatly from clean AC power, high-quality cables, using the fiber-optic input, and driving a power amplifier directly.

Audio products that combine many capabilities into a single component in the pursuit of low cost or convenience often do so at the expense of sound quality—a case of "jack of all trades, master of none." But the Lumin P1 defies that stereotype—I'll call it a "*master* of all trades."

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## LEEDH PROCESSING

Lumin P1 Network Player/Preamplifier and L1 Disk Drive

**A DIGITAL-DOMAIN** volume control adjusts the signal level by performing mathematical computation on the samples representing the audio. For example, to attenuate a signal by 6dB (a halving of signal level) each sample is multiplied by 0.5.

This sounds straightforward, but unfortunately, this processing reduces the signal's resolution (by one bit per 6dB of attenuation) and adds significant distortion. This distortion is in the form of spurious harmonics at multiples of the music signal. The product of the multiplication (the audio-sample value after the multiplication) is sometimes a very long digital word that must be shortened (truncated) by the DAC. Even volume controls that operate on 32-bit words suffer from this phenomenon; DACs that are nominally "32 bit" deliver perhaps 21 bits of true resolution at best (the DAC's other 11 bits are cynically called "marketing bits"). The greater the truncation, the higher the distortion level.

Note that the word length after multiplication depends on the values of the factor (multiplier) and the multiplicand (the value of the audio sample)—this is key, as we'll see in a minute.

This truncation-induced distortion can be reduced (but not eliminated) with the application of dither (a small amount of noise added to the signal), but at the expense of raising the wideband noise floor. The greater the amount of attenuation, the greater the distortion and loss of resolution. A few dB of attenuation is not that detrimental, but with a power amplifier of average gain and loudspeakers of average sensitivity, a normal listening level might require 25–50dB of attenuation in the digital source component. In fact, I regularly applied 50dB of attenuation in the P1 when driving the CH Precision power amplifiers directly from the P1 with no preamplifier in the signal path.

Some manufacturers have gone to great lengths to avoid the distortion introduced by digital volume controls. One approach is to simply adjust the volume in the analog domain with a potentiometer or stepped-resistor network. Realizing remote control with analog-domain attenuation requires a motorized potentiometer or stepped-resistor network. Both these approaches are much more expensive to implement and are not without their sonic drawbacks. The manufacturer Aesthetix, for example, developed a clever workaround to this problem with its hybrid digital/analog volume control. Their solution is to perform digital-domain attenuation up to 5.9dB in 0.1dB steps, and then, at the next step down, to switch to 6dB of analog attenuation and restore the digital domain attenuation to no attenuation (full scale). Although the Aesthetix volume control has a very wide range, it never subjects the signal to more than 5.9dB of digital-domain attenuation at any level. Needless to say, this elaborate solution is quite expensive to implement.

Digital-domain volume control is clearly a problem in search of a solution. The answer comes from a Frenchman by the name of Gilles Milot of the company Acoustical Beauty. Mr. Milot has a nearly 50-year history of creating innovative technologies for a variety of high-end audio companies including Micromega (as founder), Goldmund, YBA, and Cabasse. His innovation is a "lossless" digital volume control algorithm, called Leedh, that is claimed to be sonically transparent. Leedh is an initialism for the French translation of "Holophonic Laboratory of Research and Development," the firm Mr. Milot founded decades ago to pursue experimental audio technologies. The company claims that its lossless digital volume control sounds better than even the finest analog volume control in a preamplifier.

Here's a simplified explanation of how Leedh works. In short, the process trades precision of the amount of attenuation for precision in the output signal. As I mentioned, a digital volume control attenuates the signal by multiplying each sample by a number less than 1. The resulting word (sample) length is longer than before multiplication. When these very long word lengths are input to a DAC, the DAC will truncate the word to accommodate the maximum word length of the DAC's internal architecture, introducing rounding error and distortion. Leedh chooses only factors (multipliers) that result in shorter word lengths and less truncation of the least-significant bits (LSBs) by the DAC. Consequently, Leedh cannot reduce the volume in, say, uniform 0.5dB increments as can a conventional digital volume control. Some increments may be 0.461dB and others may be 0.523dB, for example (this is an illustration I made up, not the actual attenuation values). By choosing only certain multipliers that result in shorter word lengths, the DAC truncates fewer bits, losing less information due to rounding error and avoiding the creation of harmonic distortion products, as well as leaving more "headroom" in the DAC.

If you're interested in a more detailed description, including the mathematics behind Leedh, I refer you to the Audio Engineering Society paper presented at the 2020 Vienna conference by the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland, available at the website processing-leedh.com. I don't know the association between Gilles Milot and the Swiss university, but the Swiss academics have given Leedh a full technical evaluation and report in the paper. tas

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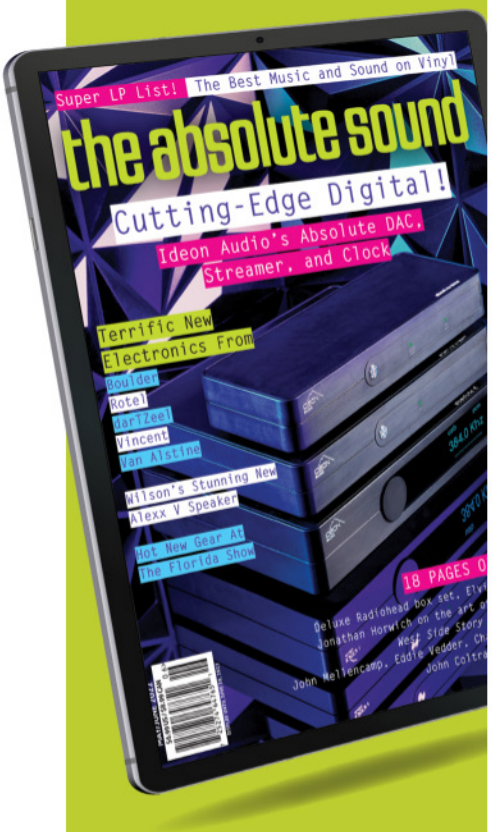


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# Manufacturer Comments

## Gradient 1.4 Loudspeaker

We like to thank REG for the in-depth review. It is easy to understand his findings and agree with them. REG raises trade-offs in the use of a coaxial speaker driver, especially when listening to speakers directly from the main axis. In fact, we have often achieved the best results by crossing the speaker axis in front of or even above the listener. Due to the more directional treble, this also makes it quite easy to fine-tune the treble level.

What comes to the bass level of the Gradient 1.4, we also agree with REG. The bass level has been set so that the speakers do not have to be as far away from the walls as speakers of this size often need to be. This is possible due to the cardioid-shaped radiation pattern in the midrange. Very practical indeed, especially when there is no separate listening room or the room is not very large. It should also be mentioned that we have just launched a version of the Gradient 1.4 with the option of bi-amping and thus electronic bass-level adjustment. This feature has no effect on the price of the speaker.

**Atte Salmi**
**CEO, Gradient Labs Ltd.**

## DS Audio DS 003 Cartridge

Thanks to JV for his reviews following the evolution of DS Audio's optical phono cartridges. We have had the privilege of working with DS and Aki-san since 2014. His third-generation Grand Master introduced in 2020 is groundbreaking. The new 003 brings this latest technology to a more affordable level. With five optical phonostages ranging from $1500 to $45,000, the listener has many choices to match his/her system.

Aki-san continues to push the envelope of analog reproduction. The DS ST-50 stylus cleaner is a lab-grade, ether-based, urethane-gel pad, like the ones found in computer clean rooms, exhibiting superior cleaning ability and resistance to moisture to prevent residue. The DS 001 Ionizer is sonically addictive, significantly lowering the noise floor by immersing your LPs in a static-free environment during playback. Now, Aki-san is introducing his ES-001 Eccentricity Stabilization Device to successfully solve the issues and distortions created by off-centered records. LP eccentricity is all too common a byproduct of slippage during record pressing or of an off-center spindle hole. DS Audio products are revolutionary, creating the future of analog music.

**Garth Leerer**
**Musical Surroundings Inc.**

## Totem Acoustic Fire V2 Loudspeaker

We would like to thank Andy Quint for taking the time to fully realize the sonic performance of the Fire V2. Ultimately, it's all about the music; AQ encountered this by first listening to his 30-track checklist in its entirety, then hearing unknown nuances in music that he was very familiar with and finally experiencing the sensation of being present in the recording space. All of this, and more, resulted in a very positive time with the Fire V2, culminating in a prestigious 2022 Golden Ear Award for which we are immensely grateful.

Thank you, Andy Quint, and thank you, TAS.

**Lionel Goodfield**
**Totem Acoustic**

## Aesthetix Mimas DAC Module

We are grateful for Neil's thorough review of the DAC Module option for Mimas. Each module we develop for Mimas is the equivalent amount of work of creating a new, standalone product in terms of research and engineering. Multiple revisions allowed us to continually refine and cultivate the best performance. As Neil found, the DAC module compares favorably to much more expensive standalone DAC components.

Neil asked for BNC instead of the standard RCA, which we quickly obliged. Customer service is foundational for Aesthetix; we strive to meet customer's requests (not just reviewer's) and exceed all expectations.

There are more modules under development for Mimas; obsolescence is not in the DNA of Aesthetix.

Many thanks again to Neil and TAS.

**Jim White**
**Aesthetix**

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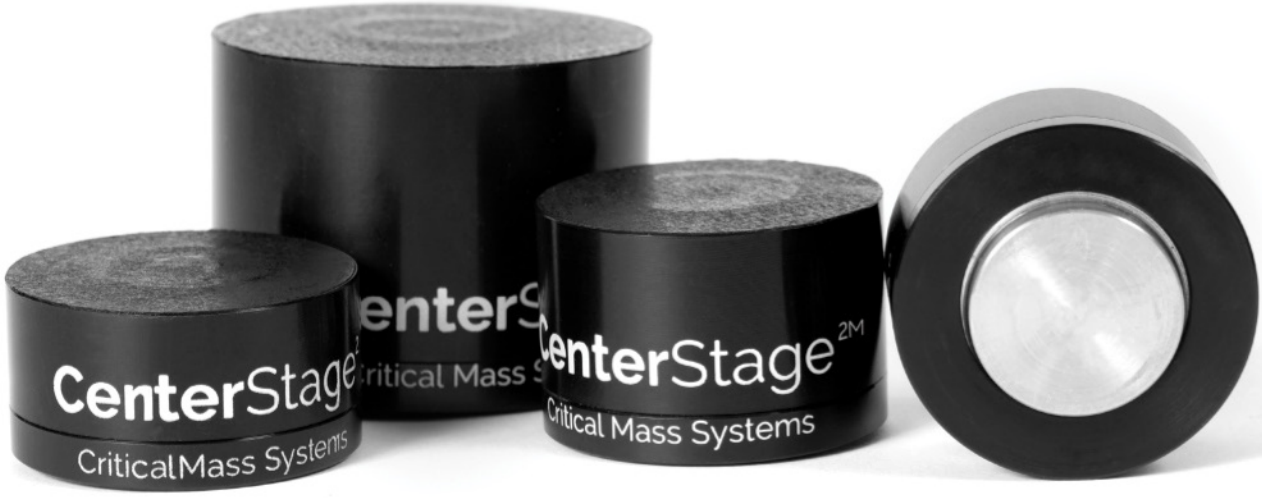


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# ANN WILSON'S FIERCE HEART

## Finding Solo *Bliss* Within Her Very Soul

Mike Mettler

"I'M OVER HERE/YOU'RE OVER THERE." Those are two key lines from "As the World Turns," the final track on Ann Wilson's striking new solo album *Fierce Bliss* (Silver Lining Music). They speak not only to the scores of challenges musicians had to face while figuring out how to record music together during the pandemic, but also to the level of disconnection many people continue to struggle with when it comes to navigating the modern world in general.

"When you can wrestle down a song that's universal like that one is—one that has that many colors to it—it will affect you in different ways, depending on what's going on in your life," agrees Wilson, who co-wrote the song with Dan Walker. "Joni Mitchell is a master of that. She wrote songs that were so intensely personal, you couldn't *not* apply them to yourself."

Wilson sure knows all about being personal, considering how deeply affecting *Fierce Bliss* is. It's her third full-length solo album outside of Heart, the pioneering rock band she fronts alongside her super-talented sister, ace guitarist/vocalist Nancy Wilson. (Heart is currently on hiatus, though plans for how the band will properly recognize and celebrate its 50th anniversary are underway.) *Bliss* is awash with a fine 11-track blend of originals and covers—a Wilson forte, truth be told—from her and Walker's foreboding, evocative "Black Wing" to her and Warren Haynes' staunch, slow-rising "Gladiator," not to mention her touching duet with Vince Gill on Queen's "Love of My Life" and an absolutely stirring take on Jeff Buckley's "Forget Her." Simply put, *Fierce Bliss* is on fire with both passion and compassion.

Not only that, but the genuinely majestic cover art by the one and only Roger Dean adds an extra dollop of progressive visual elan to the overall proceedings. "Since we were releasing this album on vinyl, I thought we should do the full retro experience where people could hold the album cover and just fall into it while they're listening," Wilson explains. "So, who would be the ultimate artist to do that? It *had to* be Roger Dean. His imagery is so otherworldly, and you can travel to this fantasy world while looking at it. It's so cool!"

Turning covers of the aural persuasion on their ear is somewhat of a Wilson specialty, especially when she's in *solo artiste* mode. Fact is, her interpretive skills are practically unmatched in the rock idiom, as Wilson can navigate—and, even at this latter stage of her half-century-long career, effortlessly surpass—the upper reaches of the banshee wail Robert Plant summoned during his Led Zeppelin heyday just as much as she readily embraces the torch-ballad subtleties of an Edith Piaf, someone whom, in Wilson's own words, "carved her own tone."

Speaking of tone, Wilson's control and range remain pure wonders to behold. "It's no secret," Wilson claims. "The voice, your vocal mechanism, is no different than any other part of your body. If you treat it well, it'll treat you well. But for me, the real thing about singing has nothing to do with the *skin*—it's about the *soul*. And that's the hardest thing to open up. Sometimes you don't feel like singing; you want to stay quiet. You have to coax your soul open—and once it's open, you're just that hollow reed the divine wind can blow through."

Whether by divine wind or divine intervention, the overall sonic craftwork of *Bliss* is very much due to the production acumen of Chuck Ainlay (Peter Frampton, Mark Knopfler), someone Wilson had never worked with before, along with her musical director and co-producer Tom Bukovac. When Wilson arrived at Muscle Shoals in Alabama to commence recording, she was met by a band the production team had assembled for her, comprising musicians she was only just meeting for the first time. That might faze some artists long-set in their ways—but not Wilson. "They didn't know me, and I didn't know them," she confirms. "But within the first day, the songs started to come alive in ways I never anticipated. We left as much space as we could in what we were recording so there would be plenty of room for everything to breathe. After the first couple of days in Muscle Shoals, this lightbulb went on over my head like, 'Chuck Ainlay has ears, and he's got *imagination*.' I trusted him with the recording and the mixing—and it was the right thing to do."

That said, Ainlay *did* have to take more than a few deep breaths when the *Bliss* sessions shifted to Soundstage in Nashville, where he was tasked with harnessing a 40-person choir, The Rev. Nathan Young Singers. This choir provides the brilliantly stacked background vocals on the heavenly yet gritty cover of "Missionary Man," an unforgettably hard-driving 1986 Eurythmics

barnburner. "Everyone in that choir was probably as good a singer as me," Wilson demurs. "And it was really a challenge for Chuck to gain focus that day because so many people came into the control room to watch—but he was able to capture them perfectly."

Like "Missionary Man," Wilson's full-bore, all-aswirl cover of Robin Trower's signature 1974 epic windout "Bridge of Sighs" features Kenny Wayne Shepherd on guitar. Shepherd, in turn, does what he does best while Ann gets to pay homage to Trower's "Sighs"-era singer, James Dewar. "What a vocalist," Wilson marvels. "And that's a song I always just dreamed I could be the singer of. It's like one of those things where, if you're a little kid and you like a certain song, you sing it into a hairbrush in front of a mirror. Heart was still a baby band when that Robin Trower album came out, and we were all just dying to hear that song come on the radio."

The character and breadth of the enunciation choices in evidence all throughout "Sighs" is a longtime Wilson bailiwick—see perennial Heart classics like "Barracuda" and "Alone" as other prime examples, in addition to the showstopping rendition of The Who's "Love, Reign O'er Me" on her current solo dates. "People come to a Heart show and wait for that high note, since that's kind of its signature," Wilson says about "Alone" with a hearty chuckle.

TURNING COVERS OF THE AURAL PERSUASION ON THEIR EAR IS SOMEWHAT OF A WILSON SPECIALTY, ESPECIALLY WHEN SHE'S IN *SOLO ARTISTE* MODE.

And then there's "Crazy on You," which remains a favorite of hers to sing, whether in Heart or on her own. "That song was written when Jimmy Carter was president, at a time when it seemed like the whole world was falling down around our ears," Wilson reveals. "That was the whole thrust of it. Listening to it today, that song opens up just as well as to what's going on now."

How Wilson weaves in and around every note she sings is something that just comes naturally. "It's kind of subconscious really, because the way you pronounce a word, especially when you're singing, is just loaded with meaning, mood, and everything," she explains. "That's what throws me off about a lot of singers—when they either try to sing with a Southern accent and it doesn't really sound real, or they sound *too* perfect. It should be like, if you're talking in your lover's ear, you're talking so *intimately* with them. When you sing on a record, you can go wherever you want—and you *should* take license with the language."

Whether she's tackling originals or taking the exact right creative liberty with covers, Ann Wilson and her amazing voice continue to deliver the fiercest, most blissfully rewarding material imaginable. **tas**


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# Evolution of a Storyteller

## Mark Knopfler's Early Solo Career on Vinyl

Greg Cahill

**British singer, songwriter, and guitarist Mark Knop**fler perched comfortably in the pantheon of All-Time-Great-Rock-Guitar-Gods when he disbanded Dire Straits in 1995 and released his solo debut, *Golden Heart* (Warner), the following year. It met with unenthusiastic reviews: Critics said the Scottish-born axeslinger had failed to explore new terrain, and U.S. sales sagged. Still, Knopfler honed his songcraft and has built an impressive solo catalog, teaming with longtime collaborator and keyboardist Guy Fletcher, while releasing nine solo studio albums, plus live albums, soundtracks, and a critically acclaimed country-duo project with Emmylou Harris, 2006's *All the Roadrunning* (Warner/Nonesuch).

It's time for a solo career retrospective, albeit a partial one.

Enter *Mark Knopfler: The Studio Albums, 1996-2007* (Warner/Rhino), a hefty 11-LP set containing five 180-gram double albums and a single disc of rarities. The collection features Knopfler's first five solo studio LPs—*Golden Heart*, *Sailing to Philadelphia*, *The Ragpicker's Dream*, *Shangri-La*, and *Kill to Get Crimson*—along with a nine-track singles collection, *The Gravy Train: The B-Sides, 1996–2007*. Two of those LPs, *Golden Heart* and *Sailing to Philadelphia*, are on vinyl for the first time; *The Ragpicker's Dream* is making its U.S. vinyl debut. (These tracks also are available as a CD box set and on streaming outlets.) Housed in a hardbound case with collectable lithographs of the covers and download codes for digital versions, the LPs were remastered by Miles Showell at Abbey Road Studios and pressed in the Czech Republic. Originally produced and engineered by Nashville heavyweight Charlie Ainley, the albums are consistent in tone and tenor and shine thanks to Knopfler's commitment to sonics and production. Together, this material traces Knopfler's evolution as a solo artist, revealing a storyteller with a passion for American culture and a pop star who jumped off the rock 'n' roll carousel, abandoning the relentless pursuit of perfect guitar riffs and catchy pop hooks to search for the soul of America. Along the way, he embraced roots music and often found inspiration in the lives of small-town characters.

For the most part, you won't find extended guitar solos on *Golden Heart* ("Vic and Ray" is one exception), though there are plenty of distinctive instrumental performances thanks to such special guests as Vince Gill, Sonny Landreth, Michael Doucet, the Chieftains, Jo-el Sonnier, and Derek Bell. And Knopfler delivers solid songwriting that, in some instances ("Imelda," "Don't You Get It," "Cannibals)" would fit comfortably on a Dire Straits album. The lyrics are cinematic, the music grounded in folk, early rock, Cajun, Celtic, rock, blues, country, and even country funk in a commanding display that shows Knopfler to have been a prime mover in the then-nascent Americana genre.

On *Sailing to Philadelphia*, arguably his best solo album from this period, Knopfler finds his solo voice. The songs are bolder and more confident. The opening track, "What It Is," a Dickensian ode to Edinburgh, Scotland, echoes the familiar guitar tone and technique Dire Straits fans crave. The title track is based on the two Scottish emigrants who surveyed America's racially divisive Mason-Dixon line. "Baloney Again" exposes the racism African-American musicians faced on the road in the 1950s. "Do America" rocks hard. Special guests include James Taylor, Van Morrison, Difford and Tilbrook of Squeeze, and Gillian Welch and David Rawlings.

Ambient sound and finely picked acoustic folk guitar color the vignettes on *The Ragpicker's Dream*. The mood is relaxed. Knopfler explores folk/blues ("Hill Farmer's Blues," "Fare Thee Well, Northumberland"), honkytonk ("Daddy's Gone to Knoxville"), cabaret jazz ("A Place We Used to Live"), country (the Roger Miller tribute "Quality Shoes"), and a slow-burning roots-rock ode to Road Runner cartoons ("Coyote").

*Shangri-La* features an eclectic cast of American characters. The album—tinged with melancholia—kicks off with a slow murder ballad, "5:15," a tale of the death of a one-armed bandit, before delving into stories about blue-collar workers, migrants, and lost dreamers and hustlers, including a down-on-his-luck trawler skipper, barroom musicians and . . . Elvis.

Knopfler's tenure on the road with Emmylou Harris gave *Kill to Get Crimson* a strong folk and country influence. A creaky banjo teases the ballad "The Fish and the Bird," "Heart Full of Holes" has an old-timey dancehall vibe, and accordions temper the slow-tempo "Secondary Waltz" and the wistful two-step "Madame Geneva's." The album's sole rocker, "Boom, Like That," was recorded live in Denver.

*The Gravy Train: The B-Sides, 1996-2007* expands the breadth of Knopfler's soundscape with album tracks, rare outtakes, and film scores. Highlights include "Gravy Train," a blistering live recording that features a red-hot guitar duel with Sonny Landreth.

All told, the material on this box set is so familiar and so comforting that listening to these solo albums again is like a welcome homecoming. tas

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# TALENT IS AN ASSET, AND SPARKS APPEARS TO HAVE IT

## New Slate of Reissues Explores the Aughts

Jeff Wilson

My introduction to Sparks came during a 1974 performance on a late-night TV program called *Don Kirshner's Rock Concert*. Prior to that night I'd never heard of the band, but they quickly got my attention. One-half of the core of the group, vocalist Russell Mael acted like a hyperactive child in an adult's body, and his falsetto voice seemed more suited for musical comedy than rock 'n' roll. With his grim demeanor, Hitler mustache, and slicked-back hair, the other core band member, songwriter, keyboardist, and sibling Ron Mael, looked like that disgruntled office worker secretly deemed Most Likely to Go Postal. With its skillful use of feminine rhyme, one of the tunes Sparks performed that evening addressed Albert Einstein's overprotective parents, with Russell pleading, "Talent is an asset/But where could Albert have it?" Listening to that chorus, I wondered what the Mael parents felt about *their* progeny. The music Sparks played that evening was odd but well-crafted—and it rocked. I was hooked.

That TV appearance occurred near the beginning of Sparks' career (their first album was released in 1972), and by now the group has released 25 studio albums. They're as strange as ever, and people still think they're from the UK when they're actually from L.A. Finally, though, the world is catching up to them. Somehow it's fitting that a band so unconventional and quirky would enjoy a career arc without parallel in the history of rock of roll—unless you can name another group that, after staying together for five decades, suddenly became all the rage. Recently a lot has happened to "spark" a large-scale reappraisal—*A Steady Drip, Drip, Drip* was one of the best pop albums of 2020, Edgar Wright's *The Sparks Brothers* documentary helped generate more buzz, another Sparks-connected movie (*Annette*) and its soundtrack garnered further attention, and their recent tour was a huge success. Not bad for a band that until recently never got its full due, and especially in its home country.

Due to this newfound appreciation, many fans have a lot of catching up to do, so BMG's reissues of five Sparks albums from their fourth decade seems particularly well-timed. Except for the single-disc *Lil Beethoven*, all of the vinyl reissues are 2-LP sets. Previous vinyl editions of these records were released in limited numbers if they came out at all, and they were all out of print prior to this project. Featuring high-quality packaging and

good-sounding pressings, the new vinyl reissues are available for a fraction of the price of used copies—so snag them while you can. These albums are also being reissued as compact discs, and four of the five CDs feature bonus cuts.

The five new reissues belong to the band's fourth decade, a period that marked a new phase for Sparks. Their early music was an energetic mix of art rock, glam rock, and eccentric pop music. A collaboration with Italian producer Giorgio Moroder, 1979's *No. 1 Song in Heaven*, took things in a radically different direction. Surely no one predicted that Sparks would end up playing disco, but the new style seemed to suit them well. Admirers included Ian Curtis of Joy Division, whose iconic single "Love Will Tear Us Apart" was influenced by Sparks' new sound.

Mixing techno beats with electric guitar riffs, the earliest record in BMG's new batch of reissues (*Balls*, from 2000) marked the end of an era, and it didn't fare so well in the marketplace. Part of the blame may belong to the title track as well as the leadoff single, "More than a Sex Machine," neither of which strike me as particularly clever, but this is one of those albums where the deep cuts outshine the singles. "Scheherazade" combines a rock-solid groove with electronic exotica while the equally energetic "Bullet Train" documents what's lost when we whiz past everything—including a mountain ("And to the right, Fuji, Mt. Fuji, oh wow/ Yes, to the right, the rarest sight, Mr. Fuji, oh wow"). The superficiality of the modern world resurfaces as a theme on "It's a Knockoff" and "Irreplaceable," both of which feature memorable vocal performances. Russell also shines on "The Angels," a darkly romantic ode to a woman so stunning even angels have a hard time dealing with her beauty.

When Sparks next visited the recording studio, they turned a stylistic corner that took them through rest of the decade and set the tone for the other four albums in this grouping. For Sparks, the aughts were all about carefully crafted art rock with thick layers of quasi-classical elements that include strings and multi-tracked choral-sounding vocals. *Lil Beethoven* (2002) accurately describes itself as "musical overkill." Intricate and overwrought, this is baroque pop at its fussiest, and you might compare it to a frilly gold frame housing a black velvet painting. Sometimes Sparks matches their overwrought

**SPARKS IS AS STRANGE AS EVER, AND PEOPLE STILL THINK THEY'RE FROM THE UK. FINALLY, THOUGH, THE WORLD IS CATCHING UP TO THEM.**

arrangements with lyrics that are deliberately pseudo-intellectual, as when the songs solemnly address music that lacks a groove, bands that lack levity, and musicians who (try as they may) will never perform at Carnegie Hall. *Lil Beethoven* also matches the most trivial themes—call waiting, ugly guys with beautiful girls, suburbanites impressed with their own urbanness—with fancy arrangements.

*Hello, Young Lovers* (2006) is Sparks at its most ambitious, with arrangements that stretch pop music to its limits. A bitter love-gone-bad song, "The Very Next Fight" indicates that the album title might be interpreted ironically. With its elaborate arrangement, quotes from Handel's *Messiah*, tympani, and church organ, "As I Sit Down to Play the Organ at the Notre Dame Cathedral" contains passages that could have been missing fragments from a Rick Wakeman album—except the lyrics don't address the center of the earth, and I don't think you'll see Ron Mael wearing a gold cape any time soon.

As much as Sparks likes to flaunt their frivolity, their lyrics occasionally address political concerns, but they do so in an oblique manner. For example, "(Baby, Baby) Can I Invade Your Country" from *Hello, Young Lovers* is a clever sendup of Yankee imperialism. On 2008's *Exotic Creatures of the Deep*, "Let the Monkey Drive" was inspired by the then-current American president. My favorite track on *Exotic Creatures* is "I Can't Believe That You Would Fall for All the Crap in This Song," in which the Maels take arm against a sea of love song cliches. Here the glam-rock side of Sparks resurfaces, and T. Rex fans should definitely give this song a listen.

Nothing fires Sparks' imagination more than high art as a target for tomfoolery, and the prospects of imagining a visit to Hollywood by the king of art films, Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman, so inspired the Mael brothers that they devoted a 2-LP set to that narrative. In 2009's *The Seduction of Ingmar Bergman*, Hollywood tries to woo the Swedish art film icon into moving across the pond and making a more commercial product, and he has a hard time evading the traps they set. While that experience may have left a bitter taste in the imaginary Bergman's mouth, meeting the ghost of Greta Garbo may have made up for it. *Seduction* is one strange album, and it's hard to accuse a band that can pull something that unpredictable out of their hat after four decades of stagnation.

Although I consider myself a Sparks fan, I don't like everything the Mael Brothers recorded. Some songs are wittier than others, and when the lyrics falter I lose interest in the music. To these ears, some strategies would be more effective if they were used more judiciously (the repetition of lyrics, for example, or the multitracking of Russell Mael's voice). That said, I'm convinced that Sparks recorded memorable music during every phase of their career, and the group has a talent for delivering strong pop hooks no matter how distracted they get along the way. It's also worth noting that 2020's *A Steady Drip, Drip, Drip* ranks with their best work. How many other groups could say the same while approaching the half-century mark? tas

# Goodwill Hunting

## Crate-Digging for Holy Grails and Hidden Gems

Stephen Estep

**When I got into classical music in my early teens, I** bought my first two LPs in a thrift store; I still have them, and to this day I get the thrill of the hunt walking through a thrift store's hallowed doorway. I thought it would be fun to write about a handful of thrift scores I've fallen in love with. We crate-diggers may never find that first-state Beatles butcher cover for a dollar, and we will always see plenty of records by Mantovani, Don Ho, Mitch Miller (and, of course, a certain title by Herb Alpert & the Tijuana Brass). Still, there are plenty of treasures to be had. At this point, many of the gems you'll find were originally released on small, private press labels and barely made a blip when they came out, but fortunately the music survived.

Hard rock/heavy metal isn't usually my thing, but sometimes I have to crank up the power chords, feel the punch of the double kick pedal, and let slip the devil horns. DarkStarr, a quartet from Rochester, New York, recorded an EP in 1983 that scratches that itch admirably. Memorable melodies, solid riffs, a charismatic and expressive lead singer, and excellent sound pervade the too-short effort. The mood is grim but not nihilistic. "My Deepest Regrets" blasts out the opening grooves with driving drums and nimble bass licks, giving way to the dark, rainy night of "Lovin' Strangers." The tough-boy posturing of "Stand Aside" is cliched, but the musical swagger makes up for a lot. Cult Metal Classics reissued the EP as the *Shines Again* CD, with bonus tracks and demos ranging from good to impressive. More recently, the original five songs and six extra tracks have been released on vinyl. Original pressings of the album have sold for over four hundred dollars, so grab the modestly-priced reissues while you can.

When you spot a trippy cover in the record bin for a buck and notice the LP was pressed on white vinyl, you buy it. That's how I discovered *Have It All* by Planningtorock, the stage name of English electropop musician Jam Rostron. A 2006 release, *Have It All* is fantastically detailed and inventive, a little disturbing, and a helluva good time. Its confident goofiness is a feature not often found in pop music: see the are-they-joking-or-not cannibalism discussed in the kinky "I Wanna Bite Ya." "Take It Away" is a plea about inner darkness set to a chirpy waltz. The overdubbed vocals, sometimes artificially sped up, can sound like the Chipmunks singing the Andrews Sisters, but they work.

When I saw the cover of Isabel Baker's *I Like God's Style*, I thought, "What the heck—an early 60s Christian album with a girl holding an electric guitar?!" In 1965, this teenager walked into a studio with 12 self-penned songs, a raw, belting voice, and an ignorance of music theory that did nothing to stop her. Session musician Joe Utterback did the arranging based on what she played and sang, and he and the rest of the backing band helped birth a wild, shaggy (and Shaggs-y, if I may) rockabilly gospel album. Very few singers write about the demon-possessed Maniac of Gadara from in the Gospel of Mark, but Isabel made the story swing. Harkit Records reissued *God's Style* while out of copyright in the EU, though their source LP had groove wear that resulted in a little distortion. (For more near-unhinged rockabilly gospel, check out, on Dayton's Jalyn label, the "One Heartbeat/The Glory Bound Train" single by Roy Baker.)

My area, Southwestern Ohio, has its own strong culture of gospel music (and bluegrass and country) going back decades, and I tend to pick up anything local in the interest of preserving it. One fine recent find was *A Harvest Prayer* by The Mellotone Midkiffs. The gentle-voiced Wayne Midkiff had fiddled on the Renfro Valley Barn Dance radio program with the Holden Brothers, and his wife Josephine performed there briefly in the Coon Creek Girls. There's no fiddle, though Wayne plays mandolin and guitar; he and Josephine are backed by rhythm guitar, bass, organ, piano, and celeste. The two teenagers have the new-to-the-studio jitters, and a few tempos almost go off the rails, but the homespun, heartfelt singing and intelligent arranging make for a satisfying country-tinged album. Hellfire and brimstone have never sounded so cheerful as in "He Will Set Your Fields on Fire." Another area talent, Trudi (last name Glaser), recorded *I'm His* for Jewel Records in 1977, with the Hopple Street Exit band (formerly the Jordan Parker Revue) backing her in a tight, energetic, delirious set of Christian blue-eyed soul, funk, and adult contemporary styles with a synth taking the bass line. Trudi, with a voice that evokes Petula Clark's, soars in songs by Lonnie Mack, Billy Preston, Walter Hawkins, Danniebelle Hall, and others. The perky "New Nature" has bluesy piano and Dixieland clarinet fills over a delicious funk beat. For love of God and Trudi, will someone reissue this addicting, entertaining album? tas

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**Arcade Fire: *WE.*** Columbia.

Canadian indie-rock icons Arcade Fire have wholly embraced the thematic album side approach for *WE*, their sixth studio album. *WE* splits its economical 40 minutes essentially down the middle, with Side 1 (denoted as *I*) functioning mainly under an individualistic introspection umbrella and Side 2 (dubbed *WE*) operating with a much wider, all-are-welcome embrace. Co-produced by the husband/wife tandem of Win Butler and Régine Chassagne along with Nigel Godrich, *WE* synthesizes its humble New Orleans studio beginnings with broader, open-air instrumentation (a Godrich specialty). The initially minimalist opener "Age of Anxiety I" is the very definition of feeling claustrophobic, with Butler's measured lead vocals mixed way out front and guest Josh Tillman (a.k.a. Father John Misty) providing, just as the credits state, "stomps & breaths," usually spread to the far reaches of the soundfield. From there, Arcade Fire's full-bore, full-stomp milieu begins to crest, especially when it's fueling the electrifying pulse of "The Lightning II" and the 80s dance-club mélange of "Unconditional II (Race and Religion)," the latter featuring a vocal give-and-take between Chassagne and Peter Gabriel. *WE* weaves the connective sonic tissue that makes Arcade Fire music all about us and them together in a most inclusive fashion. **Mike Mettler**

**Further Listening:** Arcade Fire: *Everything Now; Reflektor*

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●●

**The Fixx: *Every Five Seconds.*** BFD.

The Fixx are true survivors. They've been able to transcend new-wave-era labeling by consistently building on an enduring sound palette that stretches well past the confines of one thing leading to another redux. The Fixx's 11th studio album, *Every Five Seconds*, is as vibrant as anything they've ever done, reaching beyond the soundscape buoys where vocalist/lyricist Cy Curnin's ever-wary birdseye worldview resides. Longtime producer Stephen W Tayler, whose lineage runs through the tenets of early Fixx production ace Rupert Hine, threads the needle between the band's macrocosmic aspirations and their microgroove realities. The clarion call of "Wake Up" finds verses comprising guitarist Jamie West-Oram's bent notes warbling on the brink of collapse, drummer Adam Woods' restrained rim-tapping and cymbal work, and the inherent dark-wave tension within Curnin's foreboding vocals ultimately all giving way to almost contradictory arena-aspirational choruses. "Cold" benefits from Rupert Greenall's brooding keyboards and piano lines embodying the sound of a soulless wind blowing off the tundra, while the kinetic, angular rush of the self-analytical, positivity-seeking "Spell" contains a few clandestine progressive rock elements. *Every Five Seconds* is everything one could hope for from a veteran act with a never-ending future still ahead of them. **MM**

**Further Listening:** The Fixx: *Beautiful Friction; Reach the Beach; Phantoms*

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●●

**The Police: *Greatest Hits.*** Polydor/UMC (2 LPs).

This expanded greatest hits collection, spanning from 1978 to 1983, was cut by engineer Miles Showell as part of Abbey Road Studios' series of half-speed masters. The process, in which the master source and disc-cutting lathe are run at half speed, is designed to produce more open high frequencies and improve stereo imaging. It adds detail and clarity, especially at lower volumes. These audiophile-quality 180-gram LPs, pressed in Germany, contain 16 tracks, 14 of which graced the UK Top 20 and produced five No. 1 hit singles. There's no chaff here: from 1978's ska-inflected "Roxanne" and the high-energy "Message in a Bottle" to the mega-hits "Don't Stand So Close to Me" and "Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic," these songs helped define 80s pop. Hailing from London, bassist and vocalist Sting, guitarist Andy Summers, and drummer Stewart Copeland sold 75 million records and garnered six Grammies. The production quality on such tracks as "Tea in the Sahara" is quite high: Original producer and engineer Hugh Padgham shared a Grammy for the band's 1983 swan song *Synchronicity*, which spawned "Every Breath You Take," "King of Pain" and "Wrapped Around Your Finger," all included here. **Greg Cahill**

**Further Listening:** Sting: *Nothing Like the Sun*; Rolling Stones: *Black and Blue* (Abbey Road Studios edition)

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**Florence + The Machine: *Dance Fever.*** Republic Records.

Written during COVID-19 lockdown, *Dance Fever* has been described as a fairy-tale in 14 songs; it's also a deeply personal story about one anxious artist. In the first act ("King"), Florence declares she's not a bride nor a mother, but a King; in the last act ("Morning Elvis") she promises to show what it means to be spared—that is, if she makes it to the morning. In between, she stampedes with breathtaking speed through a long list of her dilemmas as a performer and a woman. "Sometimes I wonder if I should be medicated," she marvels while dancing herself to ecstasy to break free from her torments. *Dance Fever* is coproduced by Florence Welch and Jack Antonoff (Lorde, St. Vincent, and Lana Del Rey). Compositions and arrangements are maximalist church high, Florence's vocals lush and expressive as she delivers her fiercely emotional cry of vulnerability. The songs evoke a feeling of chasing and being chased, bringing Kate Bush and her "Hounds of Love" to my mind and sending similar goose bumps to my spine. "She's freaky" proclaimed my friend as we chatted about the new F+TM music—and freakishly good, I add. **Malgorzata Quinn**

**Further Listening:** Florence + The Machine: *High as Hope*; Kate Bush: *Hounds of Love; Live at Hammersmith Odeon*

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

**Norah Jones: *Come Away with Me*: *20th Anniversary Super Deluxe Edition.*** Blue Note (3 CDs).

One of the best-selling debut albums of all time, *Come Away with Me* launched singer, songwriter, pianist Norah Jones into rarified air. The album picked up five Grammy Awards, including Album of the Year and Best Engineered Album (non-classical); the single "Don't Know Why" earned three of those awards and has become a go-to reference track for audiophiles. This hardbound multi-disc set—also available on vinyl and digital formats—includes extensive liner notes by Jones, the remastered original 14-track album, 17 demos and outtakes (including previously unreleased tracks), and 13 alternate takes and mixes (12 of which are previously unreleased). Two decades after its release, *Come Away with Me* is still fresh and continues to charm hi-fi enthusiasts; shortly before this release, a Reddit forum found dozens of audiophiles arguing passionately about the best edition (Analogue Productions' 2013 SACD version got high praise). This new redbook anniversary edition holds its own soundwise, and the cryptic lyrics to "Don't Know Why," breathy vocal, and intimate production are as seductive as ever. But the 13 alternate tracks collected on "The Allaire Sessions" disc are the real gem, playing to Jones' unfettered café jazz and country-music inclinations. **GC**

**Further Listening:** Norah Jones: *Pick Me up off the Floor*

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●○○

**Shaylee: *Short-Sighted Security.*** Kill Rock Stars.

Shaylee is Elle Archer, a singer from Portland, Oregon, and she handles nearly everything on the record—writing, production, vocals, guitars, bass, various keyboards, drums, and percussion—and does a helluva job at all of it. There's none of the tentative playing that sometimes marks overdubbed and self-produced efforts. She creates her own soundworld (though there are reflections of greats like The Beatles, Wilco, and Neko Case) but doesn't rely on the atmosphere to provide all the musical interest (I'm looking at you, Alabama Shakes). The melodies, chords, and structures are catchy and well thought out. The swirling synths complement the guitar work, and her dusky alto is easy on the ears, though the emphasis in her power pop is still on "power." As the album title intimates, it's a very personal record: Elle bares her mistakes and self-doubt without apology. The lyrics are therapeutic and sometimes morose or self-flagellating, but the music gives them universality, even to someone whose life is in a very different place. The writing tends to be matter-of-fact, but a handful of phrases find their poetic target. This one is staying in rotation out of enjoyment, not just critical duty. **Stephen Estep**

**Further Listening:** Jonny Polonsky: *Hi My Name Is Jonny*; The Boo Radleys: *Keep on with Falling*

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**Lyle Lovett: *12th of June.*** Verve.

It's inspiring to learn that after Lyle Lovett's 10-year hiatus from recording, his quirky, distinctive style of music still entices. Supported by his longtime Large Band, Lovett revels here in his multi-genre mastery of jazz, swing, folk, and country. Vibrant big band jazz dominates the first half, followed by a shift into ballad mode. Split between seven originals and four covers, the album not only showcases his band's virtuosic versatility but also the eclectic range of his own songwriting prowess. A paean to parenthood (Lovett became a father to twins at age 59), the acoustic title track, encapsulates Lovett's strengths: tender lyricism shorn of sentimentality, a restrained but emotive voice, and an earned, laconic wisdom that reverberates through his best material. For all of Lyle's solemnity, we also get a full embrace of his playful side, such as the absurdist humor of the swinging "Pants Is Overrated." It also must be said that most country singers these days would not kick off their record with an exuberant cover of Horace Silver's 1959 jazz instrumental "Cookin' at the Continental," where the Large Band melds the difference between western swing and hard bop just for starters. **Greg Gaston**

**Further Listening:** Taj Mahal & Ry Cooder: *Get on Board*; Nitty Gritty Dirt Band: *Dirt Does Dylan*

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

**HowellDevine: *Strange Time Blues.*** DynaPhonic Records.

When Chris Strachwitz issued this trio's second and third albums on his Arhoolie Records, it signaled a rare endorsement from the legendary producer who had recorded Mance Lipscomb, Lightnin' Hopkins, and Mississippi Fred McDowell, among others. Strachwitz brooks no wimpy "mouse music," and these three white musicians—Joshua Howell, vocals, National Duolian and Epiphone guitars, and harmonica; Pete Devine, drums, washboard, and porcelain whiskey jug; and Joe Kyle Jr., upright bass—deliver the real deal, rootsy blues music that swings, growls, stomps, and moans without a whiff of pretentious imitation or feigned authenticity. On *Strange Time Blues*, HowellDevine plays four originals plus covers of tunes by McDowell, Burnside, Blind Boy Fuller, Memphis Minnie, Muddy Waters, and Robert Wilkins. Howell's virtuosic slide guitar playing is the crux of the matter, but it folds seamlessly with his warm, natural voice and piercing harmonica in an original performance style. And throughout, but especially on the haunting, shape-shifting instrumental "Strange Time Meltdown," with a spacy improv section propelled by wah-wah pedal and jazz bass and drums, the trio asserts itself as a complete, genre-transcending band with a sound of its own. **Derk Richardson**

**Further Listening:** Taj Mahal & Ry Cooder: *Get on Board*; Roy Rogers & Norton Buffalo: *R&B*

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●◐

**Michael Martin Murphey & Ryan Murphey: *Road Beyond the View.*** Wildfire Productions.

In a career marked by periodic hard lefts into new stylistic territory, Michael Martin Murphey, again collaborating as producer and artist with son Ryan, departs, pleasantly, from the cowboy songs he's made his calling card for some three decades now. *Road Beyond the View* retains the southwest flavor of Murph's extensive catalogue, but that flavor is delivered with a decided cool jazz and country-folk tinge, along with a scintillating detour into bossa nova. In the frisky western swing of "El Dorado" Murph evokes a couple of his notable past triumphs in references to "Geronimo in the Caddy" and to chasing "that mountain ghost around that trail again." Always a superb balladeer (as both singer and writer), Murph hits a high note with "Golden Summertime," featuring nuanced nylon-string guitar punctuations and impressionistic lyrics (in English and Spanish) contemplating lost love's lingering presence. Among the uptempo gems, "La Plaza," also in English and Spanish, is a cool summer breeze of bossa nova, whereas "Gallery Row" is built on a foundation of Latinalia and rock, with Ryan's stinging electric guitar driving a narrative musing about an elusive lover. At 77, Murph delivers big-time again and leaves but one question hanging: What's next? **David McGee**

**Further Listening:** Asleep at the Wheel: *New Routes*

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**Tony Wray & Tim Crouch: *Acoustic Lullaby*.** Pinecastle.

Some records are so perfectly conceived and executed as to be more than the sum of their parts. In the case of Tony Wray & Tim Crouch's first collaboration, the elevated result is nothing less than a work of art. The concept teams two seasoned bluegrass instrumentalists on a mere 10 tunes most often categorized as children's songs. In arrangements for banjo, guitar, mandolin, and fiddle, Wray and Crouch convey deeply felt tenderness and love to such a degree it's nigh on to palpable but isn't lacking some, oh, daring in variations on familiar themes. "Three Blind Mice" is appropriately frisky, but its bracing energy comes via the shifting textures in a spirited banjo-mandolin conversation. The old warhorse "Greensleeves," seemingly straight ahead, evolves into a fantasia for guitar and fiddle, in what may be an acoustic tip of the hat to the classic Ralph Vaughan Williams orchestral version. Conversely, less can be more: "Jesus Loves Me" is an in-the-pocket reverent reading for guitar, mandolin, and fiddle honoring the song's message; and apart from a slight filigree here and there in "Silent Night," those same instruments' tradeoffs heighten the melody's spiritual pull. Herein peace and perfection reign. **DM**

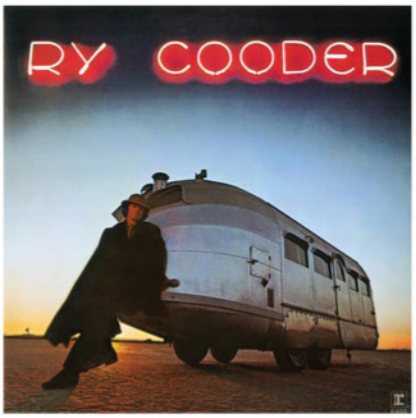
**Further Listening:** The Persuasions: *On the Good Ship Lollipop*; Rob Ickes/Jerry Douglas/Mike Auldridge: *Three Bells*

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●◐

**Karen Dalton: *In My Own Time*.** Light in the Attic.

Karen Dalton was unique. No one before and few after have been able to integrate jazz inflections into a roots context so completely. Her vocals possess a trumpet-like timbre that remind me of Chet Baker's solos. Her phrasing, sometimes behind and sometimes ahead of the beat, adds musical tension to her performances. But anyone who's heard the original version of *In My Own Time* knows all this. Limited to only 2000 copies, Light in the Attic's "super deluxe" package contains the original album cut at 45rpm on 180-gram vinyl and spread onto three sides, with outtakes on the fourth. The deluxe edition also has a 20-page booklet, two bonus 7-inch singles, the 12-inch 45rpm EP *Live at the Montreux Golden Rose Pop Festival 1971*, a replica playbill from Montreux, a CD of all tracks, and two posters. The album and outtake tracks are also available via Qobuz and Tidal. If you are a completist and a fan you will undoubtably want a copy of this deluxe edition, which stands as the ultimate representation of Dalton's best work. A labor of love, Light in the Attic Record's lavish production makes a strong case for just how serendipitously special *In My Own Time* was. **Steven Stone**

**Further Listening:** Chet Baker: *Chet*; Dock Boggs: *His Folkways Years 1963–1968*

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**Ry Cooder: *Ry Cooder*.** Speakers Corner/Reprise (LP).

When this LP came out in 1970, Ry Cooder's name was unknown, even to people who had heard him on Captain Beefheart's *Safe As Milk* (sidemen were not credited on that release). What was clear was that Cooder had studied folk blues guitarists carefully, as his excellent versions of Willie Johnson's "Dark Is the Night" and Blind Blake's "Police Dog Blues" demonstrated. Other tracks like "Brownsville Blues" showed what would prove an even more important talent, the ability to create new instrumental parts that were true to the tradition. This was taken even further on "Pigmeat," where Leadbelly's 12-string bass runs are transposed to several instruments, including tuba and electric bass. The delightful result was unlike anything anyone had heard before, something that reflected vast knowledge of and love for American traditional music as well as an understanding of modern recording techniques. A case could be made that this was the beginning of the "Americana" style, and without doubt it would point the way for Cooder's continued stylistic explorations. Van Dyke Parks' arrangement of "One Meat Ball" takes this arranging approach to an almost baroque level. Some might see this as overcooking, but when the results are this delicious, who cares? **Duck Baker**

**Further Listening:** Ry Cooder: *Into The Purple Valley*; *Boomer's Story*

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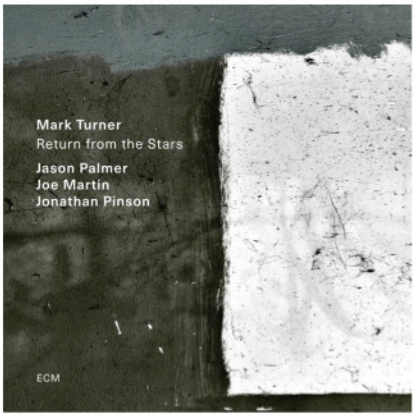
**Al Di Meola/John McLaughlin/Paco de Lucia: *Saturday Night In San Francisco.*** Impex (LP).

Across two-months of touring, this trio of disparate guitar virtuosi relished night after night pushing and playing off each other. Their final shows in front of a fired-up audience at San Francisco's Warfield yielded *Friday Night in San Francisco*, one of *the* great recordings, both musically and sonically. Impex's recent 45rpm remains the best among the many reissues I've heard. Now Impex has released the long-awaited bookend from the second and final show, *Saturday Night in San Francisco*. Half of the six selections are compositions performed solo by the player who wrote it, while the remaining are played by the trio. None are repeated from *Friday Night*. Mastered by Bernie Grundman from master tapes stored for 40 years in Al Di Meola's basement, the musical rewards here are a marvel and well worth the wait. Excellent as it is, this 33rpm pressing of *Saturday Night* doesn't crackle with quite the dynamic snap, high-end air, you-are-there clarity or focus of the 45rpm release of *Friday Night*. But hair-splitting aside, the electrifying music herein make this a most welcome addition to this trio's artistry. (Also check out distributor Elusive Disc's YouTube page for a cool mini-documentary.) **Wayne Garcia**

**Further Listening:** Al Di Meola/John McLaughlin/Paco de Lucia: *Friday Night In San Francisco*




MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●●

**Mark Turner: *Return from the Stars.*** ECM.

On his second quartet recording for ECM, tenor saxophonist Mark Turner is joined by trumpeter Jason Palmer, bassist Joe Martin, and drummer Jonathan Pinson on eight Turner originals that display a great deal of variety. Multi-tempo and multi-thematic, "Terminus" features a collective improvisation from the horns, and at many points on the record the interweaving of Turner and Palmer's lines is enhanced by an atmospheric and detailed recording. Loosely based on the Cole Porter standard "It's Alright with Me," "It's Not Alright with Me" is fueled by a powerful Martin bass vamp, an intricate melody, and sizzling solos by Turner and Palmer. Based on the Sonny Rollins classic "Airegin" (Nigeria spelled backwards), "Nigeria II" is the only up-tempo number on this set, with the horns playing a tricky melody over the familiar changes. The album's closer, "Lincoln Heights," sounds like it could have lyrics. Turner and Palmer have appeared on several of each other's recordings, and they've developed a strong connection. Martin is solid throughout, and everything Pinson plays fits. If you like original modern acoustic jazz augmented with great ECM sound, *Return from the Stars* is a good choice. **Greg Turner**

**Further Listening:** Steve Davis: *Bluesthetic;* Nduduzo Makhatini: *In the Spirit of Ntu*

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●◐

**Burton/McPherson Trio: *The Summit Rock Session at Seneca Village.*** Giant Step Arts.

Recorded in Central Park during the pandemic as part of the "Walk with the Wind" concert series curated by Giant Step Arts founder Jimmy Katz, this open-ended trio outing between tenor saxophonist Abraham Burton, drummer Eric McPherson, and bassist Dezron Douglas is bristling with intensity, brimming with chops, and tempered with telepathy. And while Burton is a muscular force of nature on tenor throughout, McPherson is hardly just a time-keeper. His explosively polyrhythmic fusillades, highly responsive instincts, and melodic approach on the whirlwind opener "Flower," the volatile "Curious," and the meditative "Low Bridge" are all breathtaking. They handle Tadd Dameron's "If You Could See Me Now" with relaxed reverence, then burn audaciously through the up-tempo romp "Seneca Blues." The closer, "Will Never Be Forgotten," is a somber requiem tinged with deep soul and heightened by Burton's keening sax. Recorded on what historically was known as Seneca Village, the first free black settlement in New York City founded in 1825 before disappearing when the building of Central Park began in the mid-1850s, this potent trio outing is a triumphant document of live jazz's return to NYC during lockdown. **Bill Milkowski**

**Further Listening:** Burton/McPherson: *Cause and Effect*

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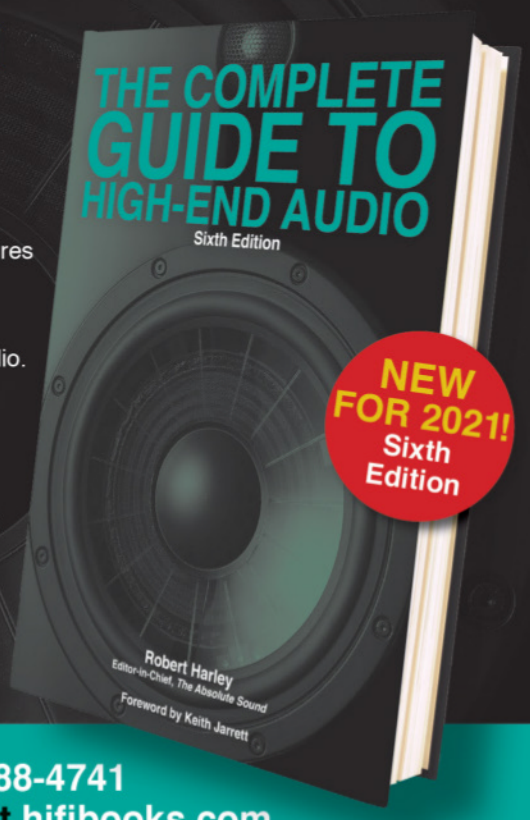


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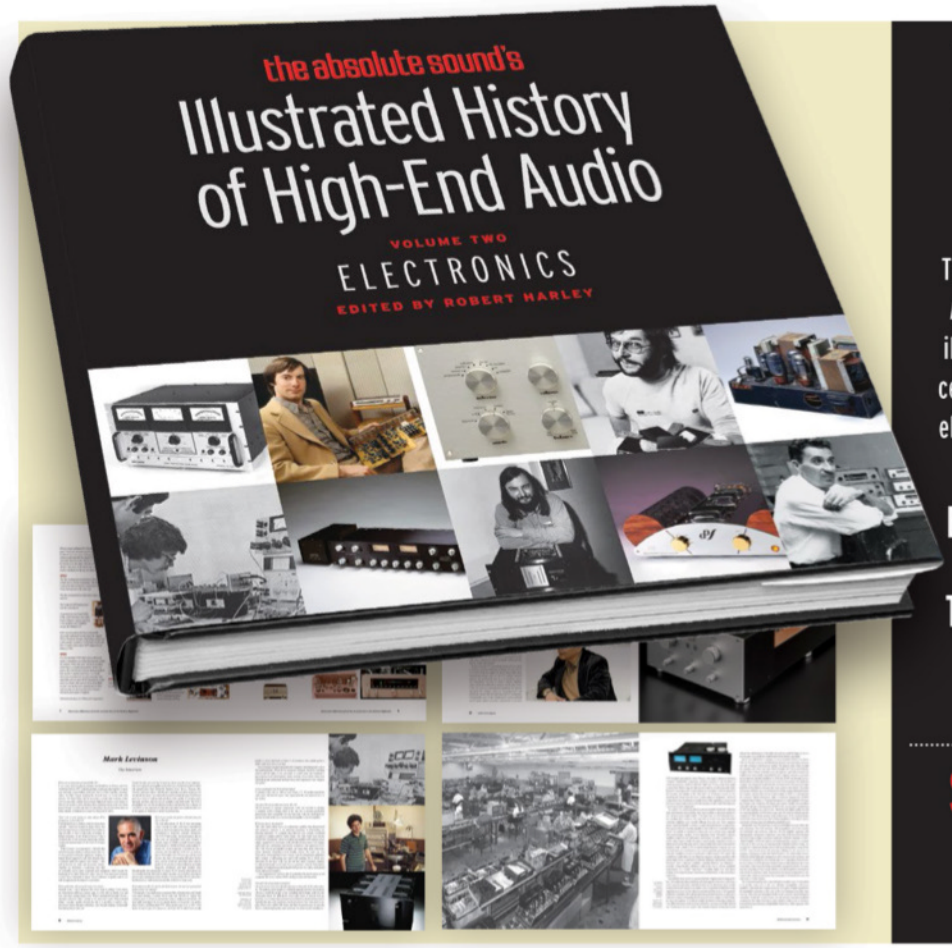


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**Tyshawn Sorey Trio: *Mesmerism.*** Yeros7 Music.

Composer-multi-instrumentalist Tyshawn Sorey has garnered accolades and a McArthur "genius grant" for ambitious works like 2022's expansive and deeply meditative *Monochromatic Light (Afterlife)*, which had him conducting members of the Houston Chamber Choir. Sorey is also a monster behind the kit, as he has demonstrated in his small group works as a leader and in various sideman situations. In this trio with pianist Aaron Diehl and bassist Matt Brewer, Sorey puts his inimitable percussive stamp on well-known jazz tunes, and with scintillating results. His "Autumn Leaves" shifts from sumptuous rubato to a tour de force of syncopated swing. He re-imagines Horace Silver's "Enchantment" as an ultra-modernist funk vehicle, then lays back on a faithful shuffle reading of Duke Ellington's "REM Blues." Sorey's most outstanding drum performance comes on Muhal Richard Abrams' "Two Over One," which has him playing melodically, contrapuntally, and forcefully on the kit. The delicate "Detour Ahead," made famous by pianist Bill Evans, finds him switching from Zen-like brushes to more avant-garde exclamations with sticks. And for pure moody abstraction, he tackles the subtle textures of Paul Motian's evocative "From Time to Time" with ears wide open. **BM**

**Further Listening:** Tyshawn Sorey: *Oblique-I; Verisimilitude*

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

**Ornette Coleman: *The Shape of Jazz to Come.*** Atlantic/Speakers Corner (LP).

In May, 1959, just months after recording his second LP for Contemporary, Ornette Coleman and his quartet recorded the first of what would eventually be nine LPs for Atlantic, all of them completed within two years. The two on Contemporary were excellent, but it was the Atlantics that positioned Ornette as the main torchbearer for free jazz. The style didn't start here; Lennie Tristano was playing free-form in the late 1940s, and Cecil Taylor had taken jazz harmony to the breaking point by 1956. But if "free jazz" conjures up a fire-breathing saxophonist pouring out a torrent of notes, smears, slurs and squawks, Ornette Coleman defined it. He was also capable of tenderness, and his compositional versatility is on display on *The Shape of Jazz*, from haunting ballads like "Lonely Woman" and "Peace" to barn-burners like "Eventuality," that sound like bebop on acid. The overall shape and structure might evoke Charlie Parker, but this music is completely different in terms of harmonic and melodic content. Never has any group in jazz history responded better to one another than this quartet, with Don Cherry (crt), Charlie Haden (b), and Billy Higgins (dr). With great remastered sound, what are you waiting for? **Duck Baker**

**Further Listening:** Ornette Coleman: *Free Jazz* (Atlantic/Speakers Corner)

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

**Hasaan Ibn Ali: *Retrospect in Retirement of Delay: The Solo Recordings.*** Omnivore (2 CDs).

For over 50 years *The Max Roach Trio Featuring the Legendary Hasaan* was the only available recording of pianist Hasaan Ibn Ali, who seemed to inhabit a musical planet somewhere between the worlds of Thelonious Monk and Cecil Taylor. A quartet date from 2021, *Metaphysics: The Lost Atlantic Album* confirmed the feeling that Ibn Ali was a genius who had worked out his own extremely advanced approach. Omnivore has now released a collection of informal solo performances recorded in the early 1960s, which further fill out the picture. Ali was a major influence on fellow Philadelphians like Bill Barron and John Coltrane. His own compositions were multifarious and brilliant, and his versions of standards are endlessly intriguing. He follows the harmonic progressions fairly faithfully, but frequently overlays the chords with densely voiced extensions that go far beyond normal thinking. He also employs lightning-fast right hand runs that sound like cubist abstractions of Art Tatum's sinuous filigree; the connection to Coltrane's "sheets of sound" is obvious. This is not easy listening by any stretch, but for serious jazz listeners the rediscovery of Hasaan Ibn Ali is one of the most rewarding events of recent years. **DB**

**Further Listening:** *The Max Roach Trio Featuring the Legendary Hasaan*

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

**The Dave Brubeck Trio: *Live From Vienna 1967.*** Brubeck Editions.

This is the most exciting "new" jazz album I've heard in a long time, the quotation marks around "new" because the only new thing is the release itself, its provenance a 12 November, 1967 concert in Vienna's Konzerthaus, the one occasion when the Dave Brubeck Quartet became a trio. It seems that two nights earlier following a gig in Hamburg, Paul Desmond, the group's stellar saxophonist, celebrated a little too much and missed the flight to Vienna, leaving Brubeck the choice of canceling or performing without him. Brubeck decided the show must go on—and did it ever!—plunging into "St. Louis Blues" at a fever pitch that, but for one ballad, is sustained for 45 thrilling minutes through the concluding "Take the A Train." Rarely has Brubeck's harmonic and rhythmic inventiveness been more teeming, his improvisation more confident, and what a pleasure to hear drummer Joe Morello and bassist Eugene Wright get more time in the spotlight. It's fascinating to hear several of these pieces a month later in Philadelphia, the quartet's last performance before disbanding: the Vienna energy wasn't consistently matched. This recording captures a great occasion in excellent mono sound, and format options include a vinyl LP. **Paul Seydor**

**Further Listening:** Dave Brubeck Quartet: *The Last Time We Saw Paris; Their Last Time Out*

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

**Jacob Garchik: *Assembly.*** Yestereve.

Although the lineup is a basic jazz quintet, with a front line of trombone and soprano sax and a classic acoustic rhythm section, and you will discern some bebop-based melodies and changes, and horn solos over walking bass lines, piano, and swinging drums, *Assembly* is nothing like what came out of the Rudy Van Gelder or Columbia studios in the 1950s and 60s. Composer/trombonist Jacob Garchik *did* record the band jamming live in a studio, but that's hardly all we hear on *Assembly*'s nine pieces, with such titles as "Collage," "Pastiche," "Bricolage," "Homage," and "Fantasia." Like Teo Macero on steroids, Garchik cut and pasted and overdubbed madly, regrouped the players for another session that incorporated the manipulated music, and then "assembled" a final product that includes overlaid tracks in different tempos; loops of Thomas Morgan's bass spurring a Sam Newsome soprano sax solo; Jacob Sacks' piano multitracked into a propulsive "broken record" effect on one tune, and overdubbed eight times on another; a hose attached to the soprano to lower its register to bass, and more. And while this may read as gimmicky and overwrought, the music keeps returning to jazz fundamentals in commanding style. **Derk Richardson**

**Further Listening:** Miles Davis: *In a Silent Way*; Fred Frith & Maybe Monday: *Digital Wildlife*

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●◐

**Miles Okazaki: *Thisness.*** Pi.

Borrowing fragments of a Sun Ra poem for his four song titles—"In some far off place," "years in space," "I'll build a world," "and wait for you"—and adapting, as a musical strategy, the 1920s Surrealist "exquisite corpse" parlor game of improvised collective drawing, Miles Okazaki brought ideas, rather than complete compositions, into the studio. These ideas were "set … in motion" by his Trickster quartet—Okazaki (guitar, vocals, "robots"), Matt Mitchell (piano, Fender Rhodes, Prophet 6), Anthony Tidd (electric bass), and Sean Rickman (drums)—and pursued for nine to ten minutes down whatever paths opened up. Decades of jazz fusion have made the acoustic-electric sonic blend and free flow familiar, but *Thisness* moves with unpredictable spontaneity, and the listener is continually tempted to shift attention from one instrument to another, then to another, then to the whole ensemble, or to a pair of instruments, so that every immersion will reveal new relationships, new dynamics, new textures, new forms. Having collaborated with the likes of Steve Coleman, Rudresh Mahanthappa, Adam Rudolph, and Dave Douglas, these musicians are well traveled in what Okazaki calls the "borderlands" of jazz, and the occasionally thorny territories investigated here vibrate with aural wonders. **DR**

**Further Listening:** Steve Coleman: *Functional Arrhythmias*

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***Gems from Armenia.*** Aznavoorian Duo. Cedille.

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***Confluence—Balkan Dances & Tango Nuevo.*** Carrettin, *Gajić.* Sono Luminus.

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●○

***Impulse.*** Bak, Lee. Bright Shiny Things.

The Aznavoorian sisters, cellist Ani and pianist Marta, have independently established successful international careers and have also concertized together for decades. For their first recording as a duo, they've assembled a program that celebrates their Armenian heritage. Much of the recital comprises short pieces tinged with longing, sadness, and a sense of place. The two composers that may be familiar to general listeners are Aram Khachaturian and the revered Komitas Vartabed. Others include Arno Babajanian, Serouj Kradjian, Alexander Arutiunian, Vache Sharafyan, and Avet Terterian, whose Sonata for Cello and Piano channels the same musical ethos of the briefer works in a more substantial package. The soulful melodies that characterize much of the material are typically played in the cello's upper range and Ani Aznavoorian's almost-human instrumental sonority is ineffably beautiful. Peter Boyer composed the final work on the CD for this album—*Mount Ararat* was inspired by the troubled history of that majestic locale. Along with producer and label founder James Ginsburg, engineer Bill Maylone is responsible for spectacular sound, especially the piano that's recorded with clarity and exceptional low register weight.

Zachary Carrettin (violin) and Mina Gajić (piano) are, respectively, Music Director and Artistic Director of the Boulder Bach Festival; they've together performed the pieces on this Sono Luminus disc for years. Six tangos for violin and piano by Ray Granlund (b.1975) are interspersed with the *Seven Balkan Dances* for keyboard alone by the Serbian composer Marko Tajčević (1900–1984), miniatures evocative of the culture of the former Yugoslavia, Gajić's country of origin. The Tajčević pieces are by far the more interesting music, reminiscent of Bartók's treatment of Hungarian folk material. The Granlund tangos dutifully employ the expected tropes of the form without creating anything unique or memorable. The recording is honest but airless and lacking in dimensionality.

Jordan Bak, still in his twenties, frames his program with two works for viola and piano—Ji Yung Lee is the capable accompanist—that serve as the two ends of a fantastical journey through time and space, from "Untitled" by the British/American composer Rebecca Clarke (1886–1979) to Tōru Takemitsu's "A String Around Autumn." Between are five brilliantly evocative and technically demanding pieces for viola alone by Anne Leilehua, Tyson Gholston Davis, Joan Tower, Quinn Mason, and Jeffrey Mumford, living composers working in a variety of musical styles ranging from minimalism to extravagantly gestural atonality. Bak is a tireless advocate for new music and makes every one of these abstract pieces completely intelligible, playing with flawless intonation, a confident technique, and a sure lyrical *impulse* (to use the CD's title) that makes it hard for a listener to walk away. The recording captures the dark sonority and textural complexity of Bak's modern instrument with satisfying immediacy. **Andrew Quint**

**Further Listening:** Tessa Lark: *Fantasy*

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●◐

***Ordway: The Clearing and the Forest.*** SOLI Chamber Ensemble. ACIS.

Scott Ordway likes to tell stories with his music. A previous ACIS release featured his gorgeous song cycle, *Girl in the Snow*, which honors the lieder cycles of Schubert in its narrative eloquence. This latest work, *The Clearing and the Forest*, resembles a chamber opera, with instrumentalists inhabiting the characters. The story line is as old as humanity; catastrophe, a forced diaspora, and a new life in a new world. Ordway employs climate change as the impetus for flight, but any number of contemporary disasters could fit, such as fleeing a pandemic, or escaping from an evil military invasion. The music is performed by a quartet consisting of clarinet, cello, piano, and violin. During the 15 sections of the work, the ensemble is heard both as a whole and in various combinations. There are also solo takes, including a clarinet melody that evokes the poignancy of Messiaen. Ordway's voice is lyrical and tuneful, but often doleful and at times minimalist, recalling the austere beauty of Arvo Pärt's work. The yawning, Mahlerian resolution of the tale is at once hopeful and wistful. ACIS recordings are excellent. Here, the acoustics of a small hall are replicated, with the listener sitting about ten seats from the stage. **Peter Burwasser**

**Further Listening:** Ordway: *Girl in the Snow* (Dawson/Naretto/ACIS)

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●◐

**Mozart: Concerto & Quintet. Birchall: Concerto.** Collins, Philharmonia. BIS.

Despite the advocacy of the celebrated 18th-century clarinetist Anton Stadler, the basset clarinet did not replace the now standard soprano clarinet as an orchestral mainstay. However, Stadler was good friends with Mozart, who wrote two masterpieces for that instrument, the Clarinet Concerto and the Clarinet Quintet. Both pieces are routinely played on the modern variant, since the clarinet cousins are usually pitched alike. The difference is that the basset clarinet is longer and has additional notes at the low end of the range, which gives it a richer, more resonant tone. With the ever-increasing interest in historically informed performance, recordings of this music with the basset clarinet have become common. These newest versions with soloist Michael Collins revel in the hypnotic beauty of the scores, an approach that leads to relaxed tempos and restrained dynamics. The concerto thus turns inward, revealing a chamber music-like intimacy, while conversely, the quintet opens up with a symphonic scope, qualities enhanced by the delicious, chocolatey flavor of the basset clarinet. The bonus work here is a new concerto for the basset clarinet by British composer Richard Birchall. The three-movement work has classical bones enlivened by raucous energy. The sound is tonally rich, spacious, and natural. **PB**

**Further Listening:** *Cohler Plays and Conducts Mozart* (Ongaku)

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

**Ries: Piano Trio & Sextets.** The Nash Ensemble. Hyperion.

The Nash Ensemble can always be relied on to achieve stellar results, whether the repertory is familiar or, like the works heard here, somewhat off the beaten track. Ferdinand Ries (1784–1838) is best known today as a student and associate of Beethoven. And learn from Beethoven he did! While the works on this recording don't quite *sound* like Beethoven—they're more easy-going, lyrically more generous—they are intelligently and masterfully shaped. They include the Grand Sextet in C, Op. 100, which gives Schubert's *Trout* Quintet a run for its money—actually does it one (violin) better—and matches its variation movement with a wonderful set on "The Last Rose of Summer." The recording boasts a fabulous pickup on Graham Mitchell's double bass, along with superb pianism from Simon Crawford-Phillips. Also on offer, the *Introduction and a Russian Dance*, Op. 113, No. 1 for cello and piano; the Piano Trio in C Minor, Op. 143; and the Sextet in G Minor, Op. 142, for piano, harp, clarinet, bassoon, horn, and string bass. Wonderful music, and performances that quicken the pulse. What more could one ask for? Great sound? This recording fills that bill as well. **Ted Libbey**

**Further Listening:** Clara Schumann, Fanny Mendelssohn: Chamber Works (Nash Ensemble/Hyperion)

MUSIC ●●●◐○ SONICS ●●●●○

***Musical Remembrances.*** Neave Trio. Chandos.

Publicity for the Neave Trio says the group's name means "bright" in Gaelic. But on listening to this, their fourth recording for Chandos, I noted that "Neave" is also an acrostic of the members' names: **A**nna Williams (violinist), Mikhail **Ve**selov (cellist), and **E**ri **N**akamura (pianist). Coincidence? Brightness aside, the repertory offered here is emotionally rather dark. Though well-played, Rachmaninoff's by-turns passionate and atmospheric *Trio élégiaque* No. 1 (1892)—a gloomy elegy for whom, or what, we aren't sure—shows little of the powerful undertow that would characterize later works. The group scores points in Brahms's Piano Trio, Op. 8—the mature recasting of an extraordinary work of youth—but its account is neither as combustible nor as melancholy as it could be. As for Ravel's glorious Trio in A Minor—written in 1914 on the cusp of WWI, an anticipatory *envoi* to a culture about to be lost forever—the playing lacks both grip and magic, particularly in the "Pantoum" movement, which should go like the wind but doesn't. Speaking of "bright," the typically too-bright Chandos acoustic is great in *pp*, not so great in louder passages, especially when the piano is prominent. **TL**

**Further Listening:** Brahms: Op. 8 (Ashkenazy, Perlman, Harrell/EMI); Ravel: Trio (Beaux Arts Trio/Philips)

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●◐

**Matiegka: Six Sonatas, Opus 31.** David Starobin. Bridge.

Wenzeslaus (or Wenceslas, or Wenzel) Matiegka (1773–1830) was born in Bohemia and studied music and law, working in both fields even after his move to Vienna in 1800, at least for a few years. Thanks to the work of Mauro Giuliani and others, the guitar was popular in his new Austrian home, and Matiegka learned the instrument and began teaching it. He wrote his first guitar pieces for students, but he soon started publishing solos and chamber music. These six sonatas are from the early to mid-1810s and are charming and interesting. They are all light classical in style and pretty good-humored, but Matiegka makes sure to throw some curveballs now and then. The third movement of Sonata No. 2, variations on an old French tune, conjures up Schubertian melancholy and ends with a disturbingly quiet minor chord. This is David Starobin's final album (he retired from performing in 2018), and the Sixth Sonata lets him go out on a high note with its playful phrasing, flavorful counterpoint, unexpected accents, and outbursts of enthusiastic strumming. Starobin's clarity and lyricism will be missed, but we can be thankful for souvenirs like this. **Stephen Estep**

**Further Listening:** Schubert: *Arpeggione Sonata*; Giuliani: Guitar Concerto 1 (John Williams, Richard Tognetti, Australian Chamber Orchestra/Sony)

MUSIC ●●●◐○ SONICS ●●●●◐

***Les musiques de Madame Bovary.*** David Kadouch, piano. Mirare.

The concept here is pieces—most by female composers—that Madame Bovary may have heard in her (fictional) life or that reflect her character and the novel's plot. In fact, only the three Chopin nocturnes are not by or about women. Four selections from *The Year* by Fanny Hensel-Mendelssohn demonstrate that she was quite an inspired composer; "May" is particularly fetching. Pauline Viardot was a French singer and pianist of Spanish heritage, and her gorgeous "Serenade" balances Spanish colors against (pardon my stereotyping) Gallic restraint. The final flourish sounds impressively harp-like. Clara Schumann's variations on one of her husband's themes sounds less like a composer trotting out trick after trick, and more like an impressive collection of character pieces. It's practically inevitable that a recital of high romanticism should have a frou-frou virtuosic number: here, it's Liszt's overheated *Reminiscences of Lucia di Lammermoor*. Erno Dohnanyi's florid transcription of the waltz from Delibes' *Coppelia* would normally provoke more eye-rolls from me, but Kadouch plays so gloriously and mellifluously that I want to learn the piece, too! His musicianship makes this recital. The sonics are decent but the piano is a little too distant, and the low end could be richer. **SE**

**Further Listening:** *Violon au féminin: Compositrices françaises* (Sara Chenal, violin/Skarbo)

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●◐

**Beethoven: Symphony No. 6.** PSO, Honeck. Reference Recordings.

If you've followed Manfred Honeck's Beethoven symphonies with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra on Reference Recordings, presumably a complete cycle in the making, the first from an audiophile label (the third, fifth, seventh, and ninth have already appeared), you'll know what to expect from this "Pastoral"—swift tempi, lean, even sec sonorities (vibrato held in considerable check), great clarity of line and texture, the live recording impressively wide in dynamic range if a tad short on atmosphere and bloom. The arrival in the countryside is brisk and bracing, the brook never dawdles along its merry way, the peasants' dance is bumptious and high-spirited, the thunderstorm rages with hair-raising ferocity, and the plangent, beautifully phrased "Shepherd's Song" rises to a strong climax. The late Stephen Stucky's *Silent Spring* fills out the program, a powerfully expressive suite of four meditations on Rachel Carson's environmental classic of the same title. The Pittsburgh Symphony play like gods and angels in both works. If a richer, more relaxed and expansive "Pastoral" is desired, try Bernstein/Vienna (DG) or Walter/Columbia (Sony), while Szell/Cleveland (Sony) ideally mediate classical rigor and early romantic ardor. Still, those who've liked Honeck's previous Beethoven needn't hesitate. **Paul Seydor**

**Further Listening:** Beethoven: Symphonies Nos. 5 & 7 (Honeck, PO)

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*I believe we must focus a lot more on young people and on women.*

# Q&A

## Michael Vamos

### Audio Skies

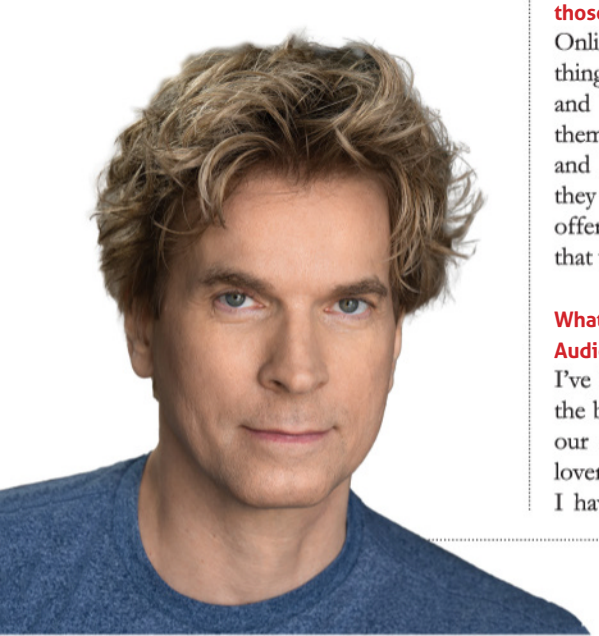
Neil Gader

**How did your interest in the high end begin?**

Some people gather around the TV to watch a series or sports. My friends and I listened to music and went to concerts, instead. Every gathering we had was with music. My first year at high school, during a weekend camp out, the amps broke down. One guy drove a 150-mile roundtrip to bring back fresh amps, because a weekend without music was just not an option. Music has always been a part of my life. When I was a kid, my parents would have parties, and I would groove to the music. I had my first system at around 14.

**What in your mind distinguishes the high end from traditional home audio?**

I believe music is important to almost everyone. How we listen and why differ, but we all listen to music. Nowadays, large flatscreens have somehow taken the front seat. But I believe that's only because most people never heard a high-end system. Long ago, I was told that *Apocalypse Now* was the greatest war movie ever. I was poor, so the first time I saw it was on a 12" black-and-white TV with commercials. I was very disappointed. Later, I saw it in the theater and…wow! On a huge screen, without interruptions and with the explosions at the end and The Doors playing "This Is The End," yeah, it's the greatest war movie ever. Until someone experiences real high-end audio, they don't know what they are missing.



**What gear made up your first high-end system?**

I don't remember my first turntable, but my second turntable was a Rega Planar 3, Ortofon MC 20 or 30, Cerwin Vega speakers, and I believe that famous NAD 3020 amp.

**How did that enthusiasm develop into a career in audio import and distribution?**

It's actually a funny story. I owned a pair of Carlson Acoustics OA-52, which was the best ever Carlson Acoustics model. I moved, and the airline lost both speakers. So, I contacted John Larsen. John Larsen worked 16 years with Carlson and created the Larsen speakers, based on Carlson's designs. John and I hit it off, and I agreed to become the U.S. distributor after hearing the Larsen 8. It was (is) musical, fantastic, and affordable.

**The dealer network is a vastly different place today than it once was. How has the import/distribution model adapted to those changes?**

Online shopping has changed many things, but most people still want to see and hear higher-end components for themselves—and know that there is U.S. and local support for the components they purchase. None of our brands are offered through online store/sites for that very reason.

**What interesting fact or aspect about Audio Skies might surprise audiophiles?**

I've have been extremely fortunate with the brands that we distribute. Because all our manufacturers are passionate music lovers and we have so much in common, I have become close friends with them all. We talk regularly about many things besides business and enjoy each other's company. I have also become friends with most of our dealers.

**What are the greatest challenges confronting the high-end industry in the next few years?**

I believe we must focus a lot more on young people and on women. Women love music as much as men do. They might not care about the technical aspects, but they want it to sound good. And many young people might only be able to afford entry-level high end early in their lives, but once they discover how good music can sound, they are very likely to purchase high-end gear later.

**Outside of audio, what do you do for fun?**

I love traveling. I love listening to music, not to evaluate, just to enjoy. I try to listen at least once a week purely for enjoyment. I love tennis. I love watching certain tennis players who stand above the rest. I love quality. But my loves are simple. I've lived in Hawaii and love the ocean. There's a Hawaiian saying: Something along the lines of "sit long, talk story, laugh often." I strongly agree with that.

**What inspires you about your work?**

The greatest thing about real high-end audio is that it's a time machine. When I say high-end audio, I don't mean the most expensive components on earth, but a true high-end system that sounds fantastic. The Doors, Nina Simone, Bill Evans, Janis Joplin have all passed away, and however much you wish you could hear them live, you can't. A high-end system can bring them back with the press of a button. Close your eyes, and suddenly Nina Simone sings, just for you in your living room. Want an encore? Press a button. What else on earth does that? Transports you back in time like that? And unlike all other technology that pulls you away from the now, music anchors you in the now—you are experiencing the music live, beat by beat. Seeing customers experience that is very gratifying. To make a living that brings pleasure to others without hurting anyone is very gratifying. tas

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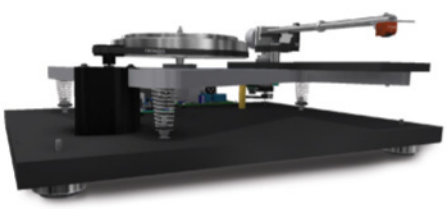

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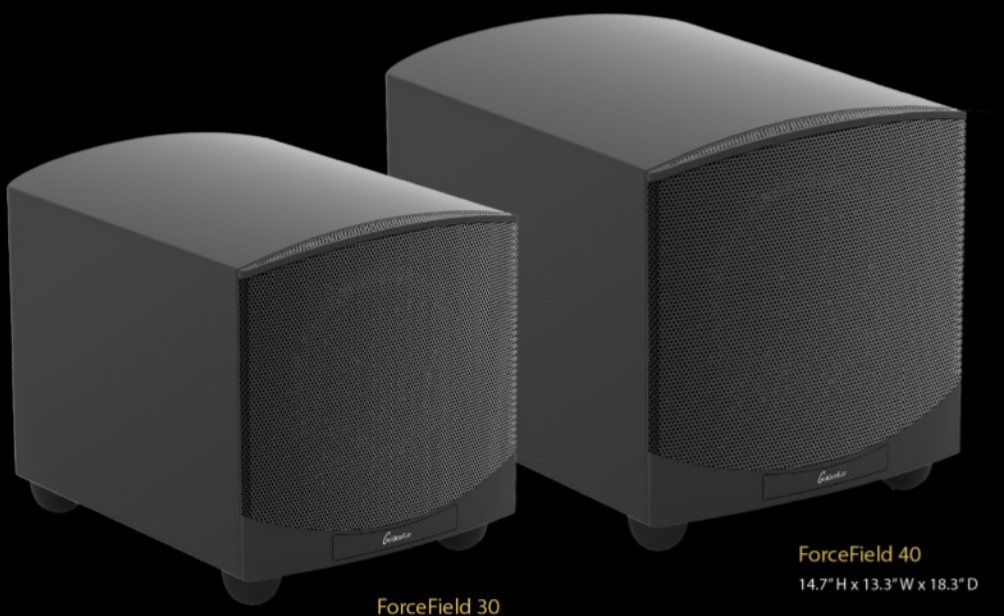

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